

# CCREC

University of California  
Center for Collaborative Research for an Equitable California

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## How can high schools help to increase voter registration?

California faces unprecedented crises across multiple sectors of civic life, yet more than one in four citizens are still not registered to vote. The political underrepresentation of young adult voters is particularly striking.<sup>1</sup> Are high schools fulfilling their civic mission and effectively encouraging young citizens to register and vote?

- In California, as of January, 2012, only 72% of eligible citizens were registered to vote.<sup>2</sup> Voter registration varies widely by county, with much lower rates in the Central Valley region.
- National trends show that registration rates are much lower for young adults and are even lower for those who have not been to college.
- According to the League of Women Voters, *less than half of 18-year-olds were registered to vote* in 2008.<sup>3</sup>
- In the 2008 election in California, 79% of *registered* voters turned out, statewide. This translates into only 62% of the *eligible* voters turning out, statewide (similar to the national average).<sup>4</sup>
- In the 2008 election in California, only 61% of *registered* voters between 18 and 24 turned out, statewide (with far lower rates in the Central Valley).<sup>5</sup>

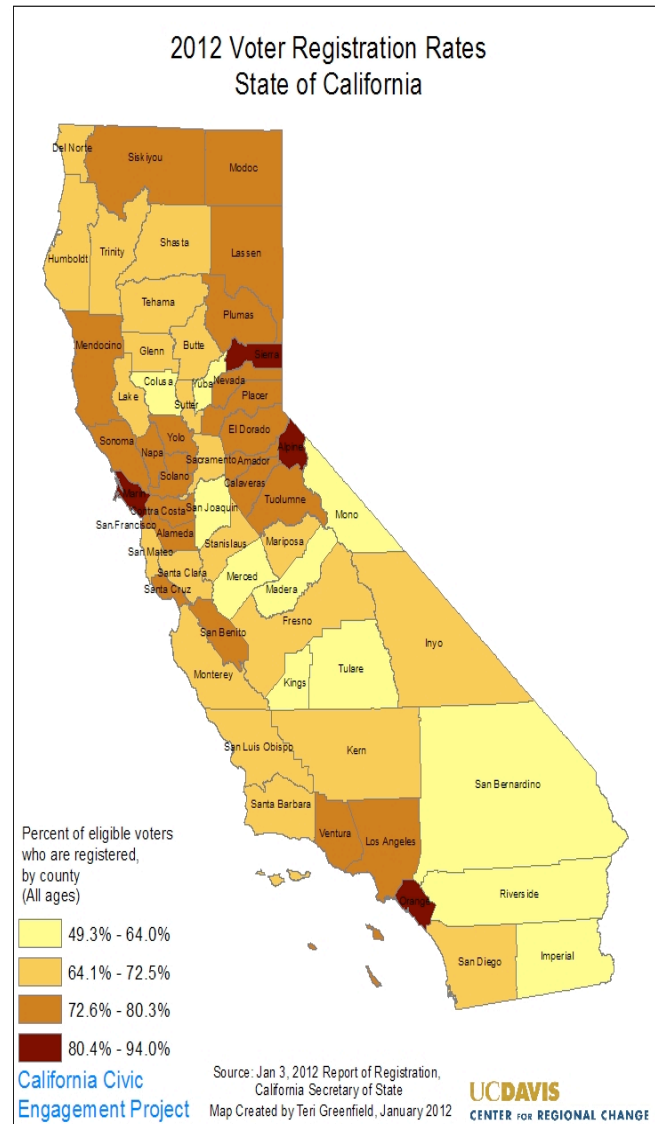
### Partners Sought for Next Steps

The University of California Center for Collaborative Research for an Equitable California (CCREC) (<http://ccrec.ucsc.edu>), a multi-campus research program initiative, is seeking partnerships to encourage a more robust approach to high school voter registration.

For further discussion, please contact Jonathan Fox, CCREC Fellow and UCSC Professor of Latin American and Latino Studies, or Ron Glass, CCREC Director and UCSC Associate Professor of Philosophy of Education (831-459-1991; [ccrec@ucsc.edu](mailto:ccrec@ucsc.edu)).

## Responsibility for school-based voter registration falls between the cracks

- At least 10 states<sup>6</sup> have policies requiring schools to serve as voter registration agencies or to facilitate registration drives on school campuses.<sup>7</sup>
- California is one of these states, and Education Code §49040 mandates that “the last two full weeks in April and the last two full weeks in September shall be known as ‘high school voter weeks’” during which deputy registrars of voters are to be afforded access to schools.
- The California Elections Code §2131 and the Help America Vote Act of 2002 encourage voter registration outreach to high school students.<sup>8</sup> However, only some registrars see outreach as part of their mission. Resources dedicated to registration outreach vary widely by county. The degree to which California county elections offices actually conduct high school voter registration has not been documented, according to Santa Cruz County voter registration staff.
- Teachers of U.S. Government are widely assumed to promote voter registration in their high school classes, but preliminary studies in Monterey and Santa Clara Counties indicate that only individual highly motivated teachers actually take this initiative.



## The curriculum may be a constraint on high school voter registration

- The History and Social Science framework of the state of California stresses the importance of active civic engagement by requiring the analysis of education policy, active community service, and projects that help students understand the importance of their vote and individual civic participation.<sup>9</sup>
- However, Government textbooks address voting in an abstract way without explaining how to register in practice. Furthermore, these textbooks are often outdated and thus provide inaccurate information on the voting process in California.
- Complementary curriculum resources for “action civics” (e.g., authentic civic learning) are available online and elsewhere. But effective curricula must address the “why bother to vote?” question head-on. For example, Rock the Vote, the leading national youth voter education organization, is promoting a catchy dvd “democracy class” curriculum, designed to take just one class period.<sup>10</sup>

## Volunteer efforts to register high school voters have potential, but have had limited impacts so far

- A 2010 action research project by the League of Women Voters yielded a useful “best practices” manual entitled “Empowering the Voters of Tomorrow” and found that classroom-based approaches were more effective than school assembly appeals.<sup>11</sup>
- The impact of the LWV project was limited: remarkably, LWV volunteers were only allowed to organize registration visits in *less than half of the high schools contacted*. Plus, LWV volunteers collected registration forms from *only one third of students encountered* in their classroom visits.

## 17 year olds who will be 18 by the next election can also be pre-registered in California

- Both school-based and volunteer-led strategies appear to have largely ignored the eligibility of 17-year-olds to pre-register in California.
- However, counties with active voter registration outreach programs, such as Monterey and Santa Cruz, do register eligible 17-year-old high school students.
- Nonetheless, remarkably few stakeholders (even those who are well-informed politically) are aware of this inclusionary option.
- State law AB 30 (2009) intended to promote the widespread pre-registration of 17-year-olds, but its full implementation has been blocked by a long-delayed overhaul of the state’s entire voting rolls.
- This obstacle does not preempt pre-existing law. AB 30’s first line reads: “Existing law authorizes a person who will be 18 years of age at the time of the next election to register to vote by executing an affidavit of registration.”<sup>12</sup>

## Discussion Questions

- How can high schools register a larger share of their age-eligible citizens to vote?
- Which level of authority in the educational system is best-positioned to lead the process of more fully embedding voter registration into high school routines?
- Who within schools can/should take primary responsibility for actually carrying out voter registration?
- To what degree is the availability of appropriate curricula an issue, and how could that be addressed?
- How can school systems collaborate more effectively with County Registrars of Voters?
- How can school-based registration efforts partner effectively with civic-minded students and alumni?
- How can civic organizations collaborate most effectively with school-based voter registration?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Citizens under the age of 30 made up 21 percent of the adult citizen population in 2008, but only 17 percent of the voters and a disproportionately high 29 percent of the unregistered population.” [http://projectvote.org/images/publications/Youth%20Voting/2010\\_Policy\\_Paper-Enfranchising\\_American\\_Youth.pdf](http://projectvote.org/images/publications/Youth%20Voting/2010_Policy_Paper-Enfranchising_American_Youth.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/elections\\_u.htm](http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/elections_u.htm). Though this number is higher than the 68% registered in 2008, there remains a substantial number of citizens who are potential voters.

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.lwv.org/content/high-school-voter-registration-training-manual>

<sup>4</sup> This was the highest voter turnout since 1984.

<sup>5</sup> We do not yet have California data on turnout as a share of eligible voters broken down by age group.

<sup>6</sup> Five of these states also promote voter registration of citizens under the age of 18. See <http://www.fairvote.org/youth-preregistration-fact-sheet#.T0wKCPWLLpU>

<sup>7</sup> See: [http://projectvote.org/images/publications/Youth%20Voting/2010\\_Policy\\_Paper-Enfranchising\\_American\\_Youth.pdf](http://projectvote.org/images/publications/Youth%20Voting/2010_Policy_Paper-Enfranchising_American_Youth.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> See California Elections Code §2131 (<http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/displaycode?section=elec&group=02001-03000&file=2130-2131>) and the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) (US Public Law 107-252) ([http://www.fec.gov/hava/law\\_ext.txt](http://www.fec.gov/hava/law_ext.txt)). CA EC §2131 refers to HAVA, which requires High Schools to conduct mock elections and to provide voter registration of students and parents.

<sup>9</sup> The California History and Social Science Content Standards for Grades K-12 can be accessed at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/histsocscistnd.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> See [www.democracyclass.com](http://www.democracyclass.com). In addition, promising online youth-oriented civic education resources include:

- <http://www.generationcitizen.org/what-we-do>, [http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/Young\\_Voters\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/Young_Voters_Guide.pdf)
- <http://www.centerforactioncivics.org/elections-in-action-lessons/>
- <http://theleague.com>

<sup>11</sup> This is one of the very few studies of high school voter registration. See: <http://www.lwv.org/content/high-school-voter-registration-training-manual>

<sup>12</sup> See bill language: [http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/09-10/bill/asm/ab\\_0001-0050/ab\\_30\\_bill\\_20091011\\_chaptered.pdf](http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/09-10/bill/asm/ab_0001-0050/ab_30_bill_20091011_chaptered.pdf)

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California



CCREC is a University of California multi-campus research program initiative that links university researchers, community-based organizations, and policy-makers in collaborative projects to achieve creative solutions to the problems in our communities. CCREC addresses the state’s interconnected crises in the economy, education, employment, environment, health, housing, and nutrition. It is also part of CCREC’s mission to prepare a new generation of engaged scholars and community leaders.