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UC's New Electorate Project Reveals Initial Impact of Voter's Choice Act

First findings: Turnout increased for diverse groups of voters in counties adopting the electoral reforms

The Voter's Choice Act is transforming voting methods in California: the how, where and when of voting. Is it also changing who votes?

That's the one of the primary questions driving the New Electorate Project. Led by Thad Kousser of the University of California San Diego, the project is now sharing its first research findings, an analysis of turnout patterns in the 2018 elections, when five California counties in the state implemented the Voter's Choice Act.

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In the 2018 elections, the five California counties to make the switch — to voting entirely by mail and through vote centers, among other changes — were Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento and San Mateo. Comparing turnout trends for eligible voters in these five counties to counties that haven't yet adopted the reform suggests that the Voter's Choice Act increased turnout by approximately 3 percentage points in the 2018 general election and 4 percentage points in the primary.

Turnout in California was historically high in 2018, said Kousser, professor and chair of UC San Diego's Department of Political Science, but the five counties adopting the reform saw a steeper rise than the others.

Beyond the straightforward analysis — and demographics

Additional analysis, holding constant for historical trends within the counties – taking into account how they differ from others – as well as statistically controlling for competitiveness of the elections in these counties, yielded findings similar to the straightforward analysis.

"What we find in the five counties adopting the reform," Kousser said, "is a modest but measurable increase that's attributable to the reform."

The Voter's Choice Act also seemed to increase turnout for voters in many demographic groups. According to the research brief, co-authored, in addition to Kousser, by Eric McGhee of the Public Policy Institute of California and Mindy Romero and Laura Daly of the California Civic Engagement Project at the University of Southern California, counties that adopted the reforms also saw steeper gains in turnout for young voters, Latinos and Asian Americans – groups of voters than have traditionally had lower rates of turnout.

The research team estimates that the reform boosted turnout between 2 and 7 percentage points in these groups, depending on the group and whether it was the primary or general election. However, the researchers caution, they are less confident in these increases being due to the reforms, rather than chance, because turnout rates vary more widely from county to county for voters in these subgroups than for voters overall.

Next steps

The researchers also note that the five counties implementing the Voter's Choice Act are not perfectly representative of the state as a whole. As the reform expands to more counties, the researchers will continue their analyses.

"As more counties adopt the Voter's Choice Act in future elections, including Orange and Los Angeles counties in 2020, it will be important to see what happens in more diverse electorates and where voters are less accustomed to voting by mail," Kousser said.

The New Electorate Project, funded by a multi-year grant from the University of California Office of the President, brings together faculty members, graduate students and undergraduates at five UC campuses with collaborators at USC and the Public Policy Institute of California. The team is conducting original research and summarizing their findings in research briefs tailored to policymakers, advocates, journalists and interested members of the public.

The team will continue to release results on newelectorateproject.org.

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