

Highlights

- Almost 4 million online voter registration (OVR) applications have been completed in California since 2012.
- Since January 2016, there have been 1.8 million OVR applications completed. Over half of these occurred in the last month before the May registration deadline.
- 36.7% of Californians registered to vote have done so online since this option was introduced in 2012.
- People from more densely populated areas are more likely to use OVR in California.
- Most Californians who register online are aged 18-34.
- Most Latinos and Asian-Americans registering online are U.S.-born.
- People in high income brackets use OVR more than other registration methods, while people in the lowest income bracket register offline more than through OVR.
- Most Californians registering with the Democratic Party have used online registration since it was introduced.

Author

Mindy Romero, Ph.D.
 Founding Director,
 California Civic
 Engagement Project

Online Voter Registration: Expanding Access to California's Electoral Process

In September 2012, California implemented online voter registration (OVR).¹ Today, California is one of 31 states plus the District of Columbia to currently offer this option (four additional states will soon join them).

The introduction of OVR was a significant election reform aimed at expanding the state's electorate, and encouraging the registration of historically underrepresented groups.

As we approach the four-year anniversary of this

landmark change, it is time to ask: what impact has OVR had on California's large and diverse electorate?

Utilizing California voter registration records, we examine the following questions:²

1. To what extent is OVR being used in California?
2. What are the characteristics of the population using OVR?
3. What opportunities are there to expand the use of OVR?

1. To what extent is OVR being used in California?

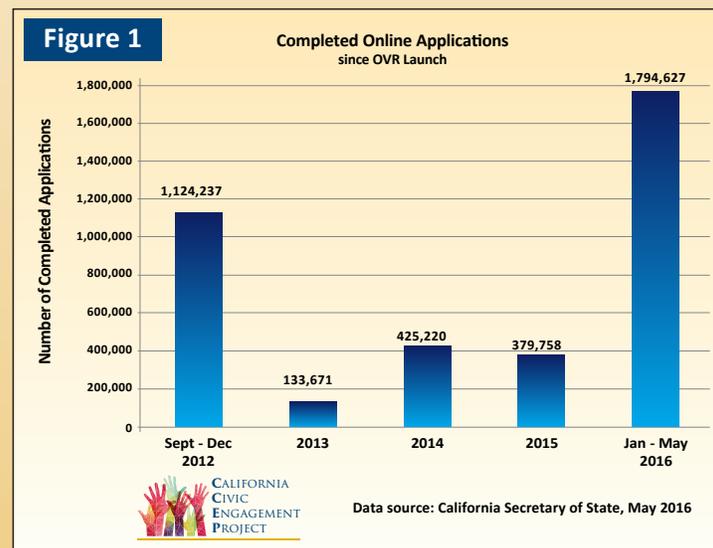
Since OVR was implemented, the California Secretary of State has received and processed 3,857,513 applications for online voter registration (filed by new registrants and including applications to re-register through the May 23, 2016 primary election registration deadline). OVR proved popular when it was initially launched. Timing helped: in California, there is typically a boost in overall registration in the month before an election (and before the state's 15-day registration deadline) as interest in voting peaks. Since OVR was implemented, 25 percent of new registrants chose to register online during the period leading up to the 2012 general election (CCEP Policy Brief 4).³ The issues in the 2012 election also influenced this trend. In 2012, supporters of Proposition 30 (which increased taxes to benefit education) encouraged many young voters to register, boosting use of the new online system.⁴

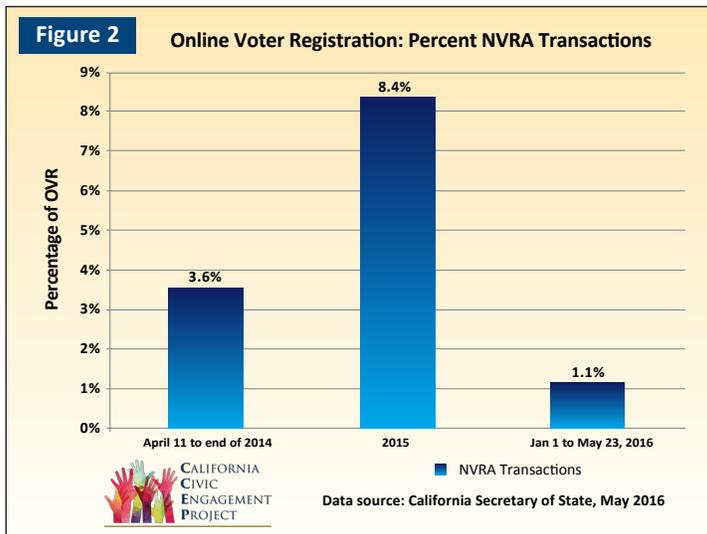
Since that successful start, rates of OVR have been variable, due in part to the election cycle. As we can see in Figure 1, from 2013-2015, online registration occurred at much lower rates, hitting a high point in the midterm election year of 2014. With interest in the presidential primary on the rise, OVR use increased dramatically in California during the first five months of 2016. During that period 1,794,627 online registrations were completed, 952,755 of those in the final month before the May 23 registration deadline.

The nearly 4 million completed OVR applications include applications from people who registered through OVR more than once, those who registered through non-online methods after initially registering online,

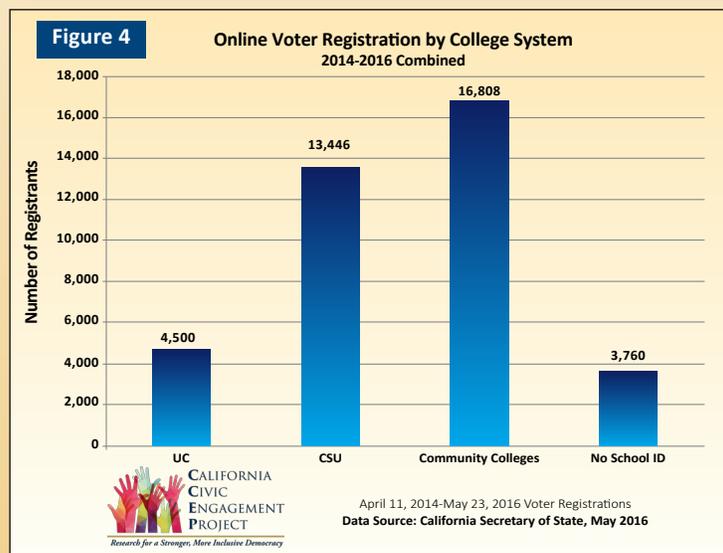
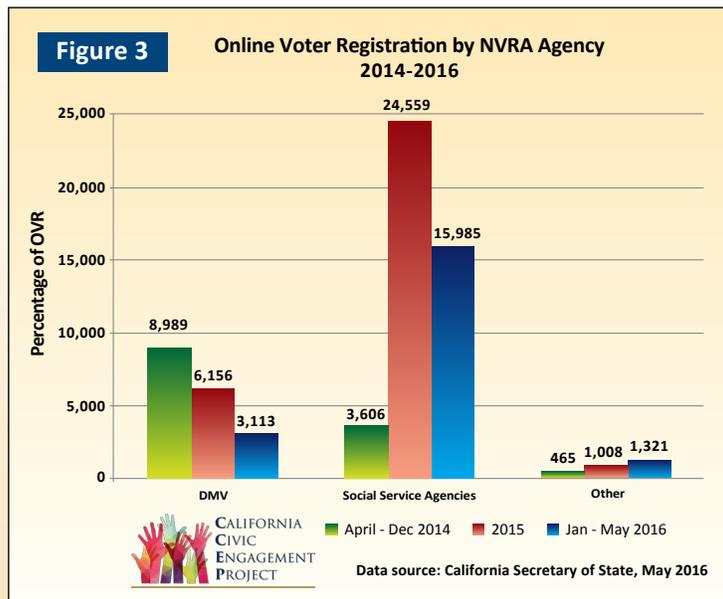
and those who did not follow up by submitting a voter signature page when required to do so. All of these factors produced a lower number of registrants identified as OVR users in official state voter registration records.

As of California's primary election registration deadline, there are 2,289,859 online registrants on record, comprising 12.8% of all the 17.9 million registered voters in California. Of all people who are currently registered to vote and who registered since September 2012, 36.7% have registered online.





Note: Prior to April 2014, detailed OVR data for NVRA agencies was not available from the California Secretary of State. April 2014 marks the launch of the redesigned interface on the California voter registration web page (known as COVR II).



Note: See the CCEP Data Hub website for OVR use rates by specific college campus.

The National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) and OVR

The National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) requires states to designate agencies that provide public assistance or services to people with disabilities to function as voter registration agencies. These public agencies must offer each person they interact with the ability to register to vote.⁵ Figure 2 shows the fluctuating percentage of completed OVR applications through California’s NVRA designated agencies since April 2014.

Figure 3 shows that online voter registration initiated through California NVRA agencies occurred most often with social service agencies (CA Health Benefit Exchange Email, WIC Office, CA Health Benefit Exchange Website, County/Health/Social Human/Family/In-Home Services) rather than through links provided by the DMV. A very small number of OVR registrations occurred through other types of agencies such as those serving the disabled community and the military. Since OVR’s implementation, there have been no reported registrations through the military. Although there has been a significant surge in online voter registration in 2016, fewer of these registrations occurred via the DMV or social service agencies than in 2015 or 2014.

OVR Use By College System

The California Student Voter Registration Act (SVRA) requires every community college and California State University (CSU) campus to allow its students to register to vote during the class registration process using a link to California’s online voter registration system. University of California campuses are encouraged but not required to comply with this provision.⁶ Across college systems, there is great variation in how SVRA is implemented and where campuses place the OVR link on their websites. Many college campuses place the link in the margins of class registration pages, resulting in students not noticing the link as they complete the course registration process.

Figure 4 illustrates that the current implementation of the SVRA has registered very low numbers of students. Only 38,514 students have registered through an official campus OVR link, while California college systems have a combined student enrollment of 2.8 million (2014-2015 academic year).⁷ Overall, the UC system has the lowest absolute numbers of OVR registrants compared to CSUs and community colleges. Seven out of the 10 UC campuses saw fewer than 200 of their students register to vote using their official campus OVR link in the nearly 4 year period since OVR was implemented (UC Riverside and UC Irvine have the fewest identified registrants at 27 and 82, respectively. UC Davis has 262 identified OVR registrations.)

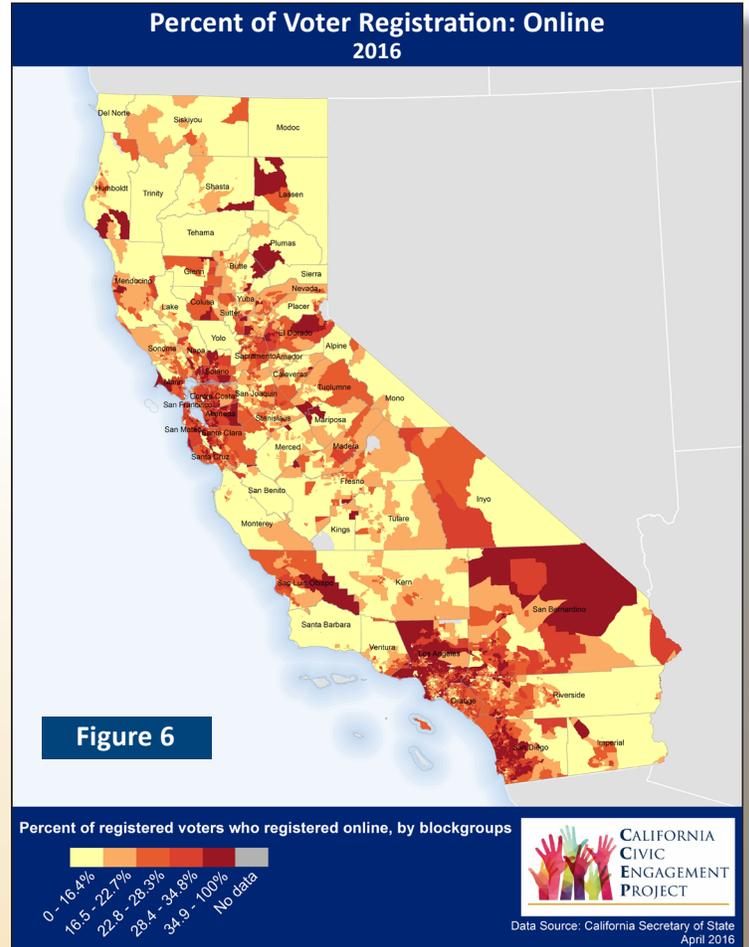
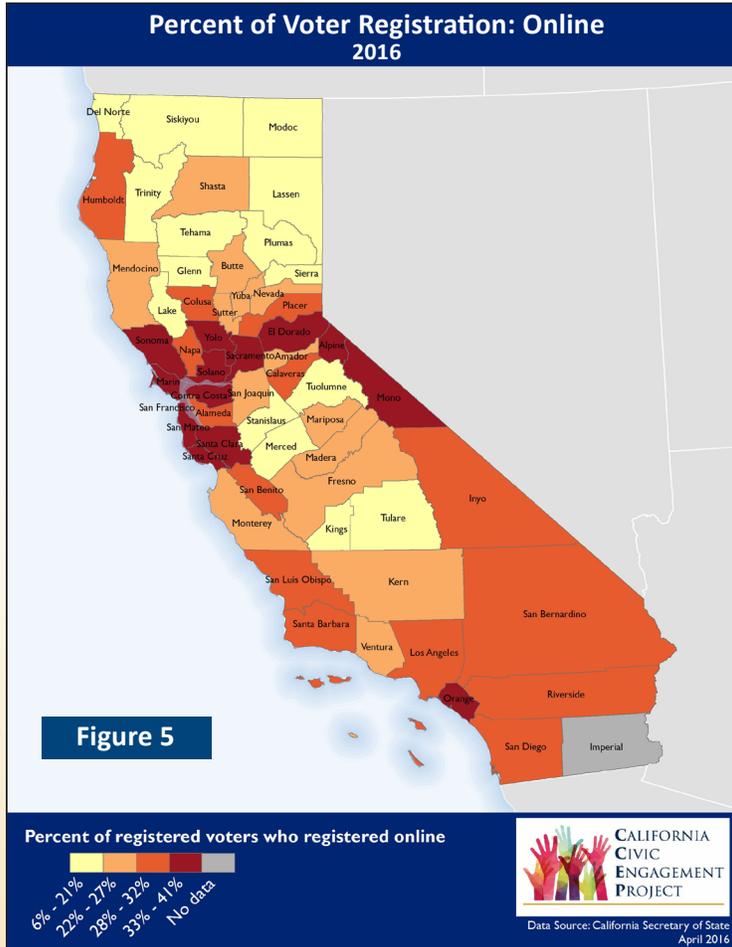
UC students together make up only 11.7% of all those registered through a campus OVR link since September 2012, compared with 34.9% for CSUs and 43.6% for California’s community colleges. The UC system comprises 8.9% of California’s total public college system enrollment for a single academic year, while CSUs make-up 16.7% and California’s community colleges are 74.4% (2014-2015 academic year).

Note: There may be some instances where links embedded on campus websites are not able to provide trackable registration data by a student’s school enrollment. Voter registrations occurring through such links would not be included in this study.

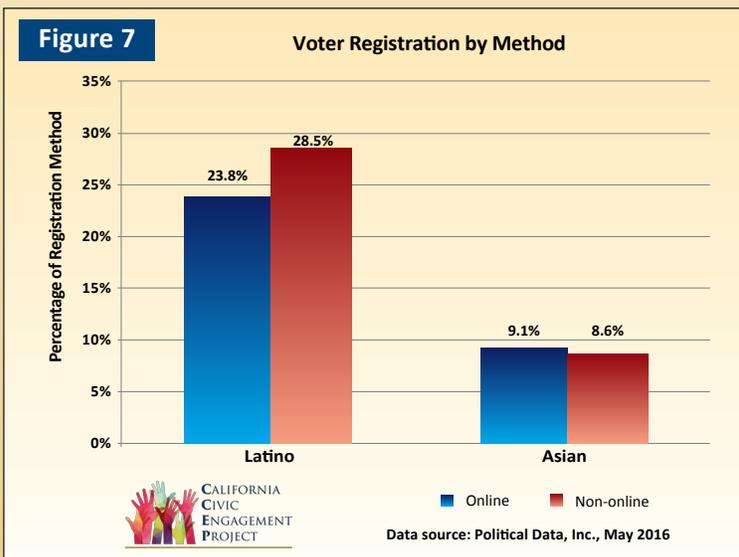
2. What are the characteristics of the population using OVR?

Geographic Variation in OVR Use

As shown in Figure 5, there is a wide variation in the use of OVR by county in California, from a low of 6.5% and 11.1% in Modoc and Trinity Counties, respectively, to over 40% in Marin and San Mateo Counties. However, when we change our geographic level of analysis from county to precinct, as illustrated in Figure 6, we see that OVR use appears to be higher in the state's large population centers. Precincts with comparably higher OVR use rates are clustered in the densely populated Bay Area, Sacramento and Los Angeles regions. Overall, large rural precincts have the lowest OVR use rates.

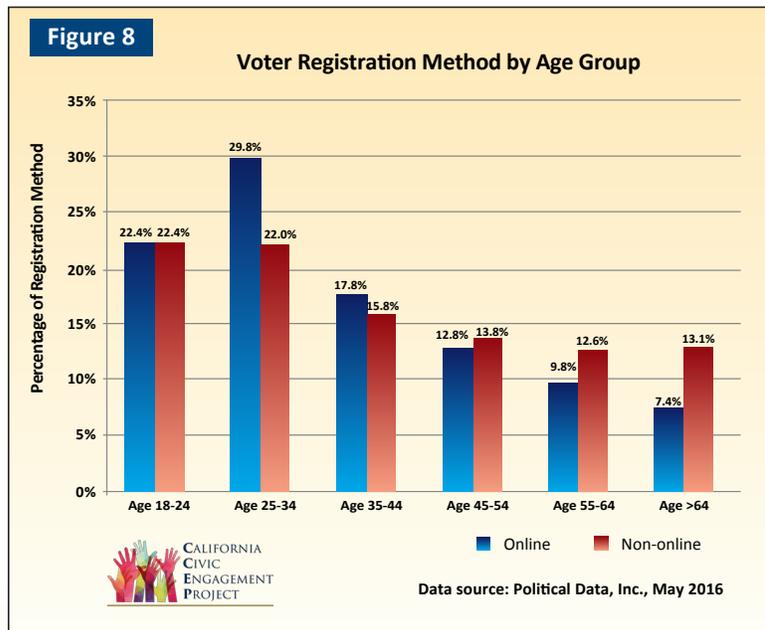


OVR Use for Latinos and Asian-Americans



Since September 2012, 32.7% of Latinos who registered to vote in California did so through OVR. For Asian-Americans the number is higher at 38.0%. Figure 7 shows that these different use rates have resulted in Latinos being 23.8% of the overall population of OVR users, but 28.5% of the non-online registering population (via mail, election offices, DMV, social services, voter registration drives etc.). Asian-Americans are 9.1% of OVR users and 8.6% of those who registered through non-online methods.

Online Registrants by Age Group

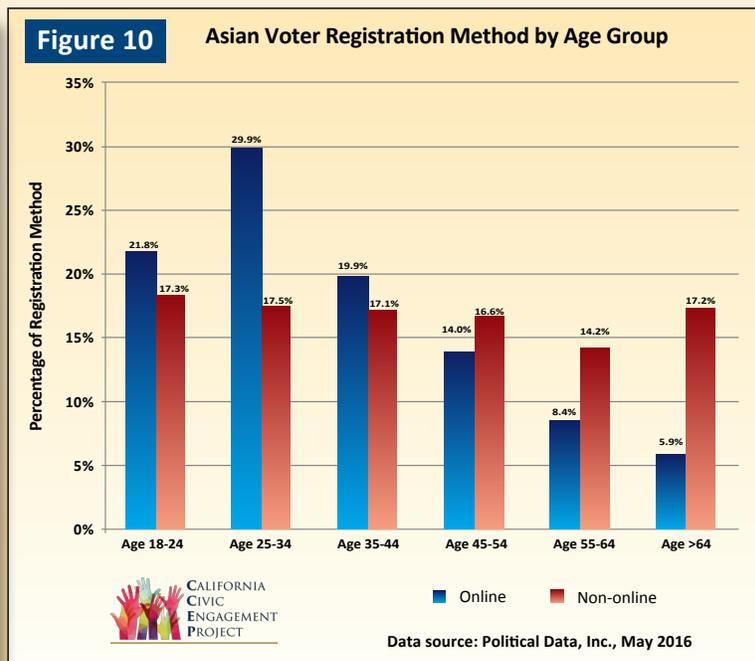
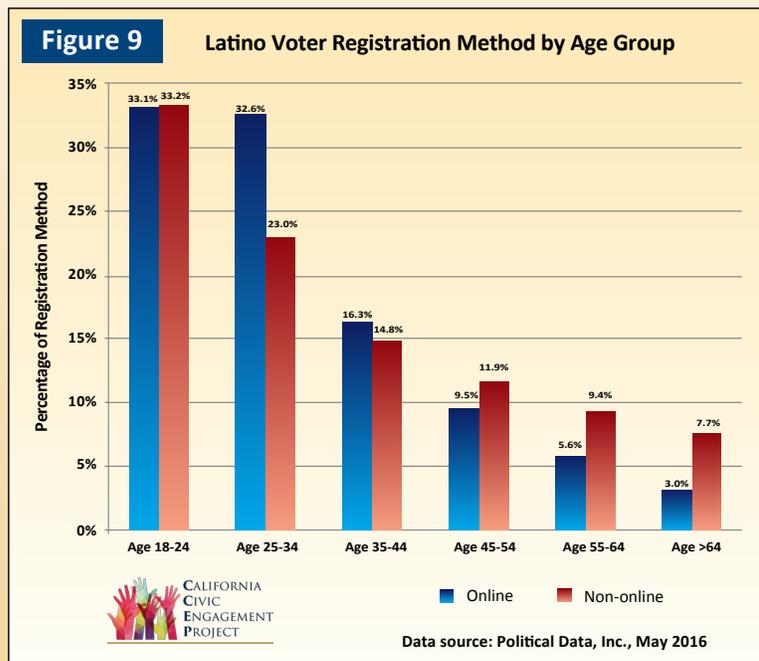


Californians under age 35 are using the state’s online voter registration system in much larger percentages than older Californians. Nearly 37% of 18-24 year-olds registered since September 2012 did so through OVR and 44.0% of registrants age 25-34 used OVR.

These use rates mean that for the total population that registered since September 2012, those who registered online are much younger than those who registered offline. Indeed, a majority of Californians who registered to vote online are under age 35. Figure 8 shows that older millennials aged 25-34 comprise the largest share of the OVR population at 29.8%, followed by those aged 18-24 at 22.4%. Relatively few voters over the age of 55 have registered to vote online.

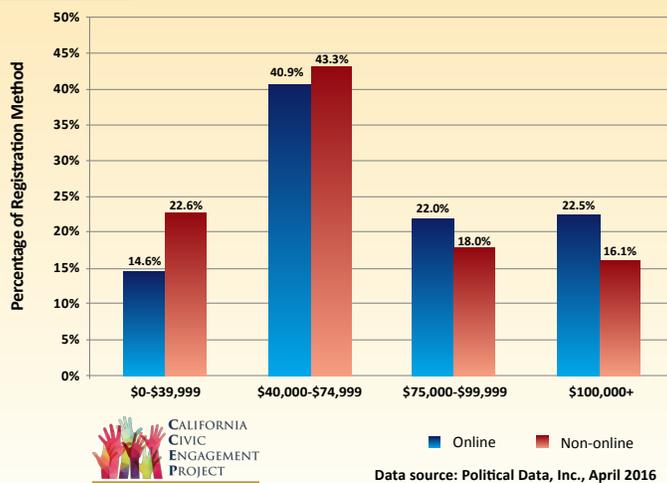
As illustrated in Figure 9, the use of OVR is common among Latino millennials, with those aged 18-34 comprising 65.7% of those Latinos registering online. Latino voters over age 55 registered online at even lower rates than the overall

population in that age group. Asian Americans using OVR were somewhat older, as shown in Figure 10. However, those aged 55 and over still tend to use non-online registration methods, like their Latino and general population counterparts.



Online Registration by Income

Figure 11 Online Voter Registration Method by Income Level



Before OVR was implemented in California, election analysts debated whether it would be accessible to lower-income Californians who might have less access to the internet and, therefore, whether OVR would be disproportionately used by Californians with higher incomes.

An analysis of the registration data through April 2016 shows that there are differing use rates of OVR across income groups. Since OVR was implemented, 18.4% of registrants from households with an annual income of less than \$40,000 utilized OVR. Nearly 25% of registrants with a household income between \$40,000 to \$74,999 chose OVR and 30% of those from households with an income of \$75,000 to \$99,999 utilized OVR for their voter registration. Thirty three percent of registrants with household incomes \$100,000 or greater chose OVR over non-online methods.⁸ Figure 11 shows that the distribution of all registrants (who registered after the

implementation of OVR) by registration type has been uneven in all four income groups. Among those in the lowest income group, significantly more people registered using non-online methods - 22.6% versus 14.6%.

OVR Use by Income: Latino and Asian American

As is true of the total registrant population, Latino and Asian-American OVR use rates vary somewhat by income group. Nearly twenty-four percent of Latino online registrants are low-income, whereas 31.3% of offline Latino registrants fall into this category. Overall, more Latino registrants, regardless of registration method, are from low-income groups than the total population. Latinos in households earning \$100,000 or more annually comprised 10% of Latino online registrants and 6.8% of those registering offline.

In contrast, fewer Asian-American registrants are from lower-income groups than are Latinos or the general registrant population as a whole. Only 10.4% of Asian Americans who chose to register online are from the lowest income bracket, compared to 16.1% of those who registered using a different method. Nearly 30% of Asian Americans who registered online have a household income of \$100,000 or greater.

Note: Prior to 2016, OVR use rates versus non-use rates were distributed more evenly across income groups. The recent surge in voter registration in 2016 has been characterized by larger differences in registration method used between different income brackets. Since January 2016, OVR use has skewed somewhat to high-income Californians.

Figure 12 Latino Voter Registration Method by Income Level

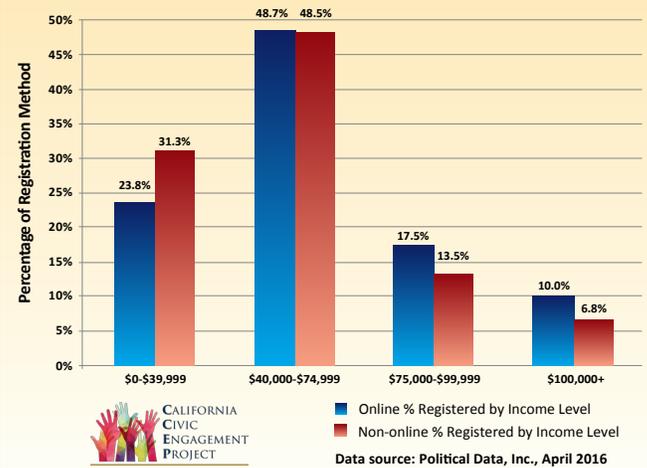
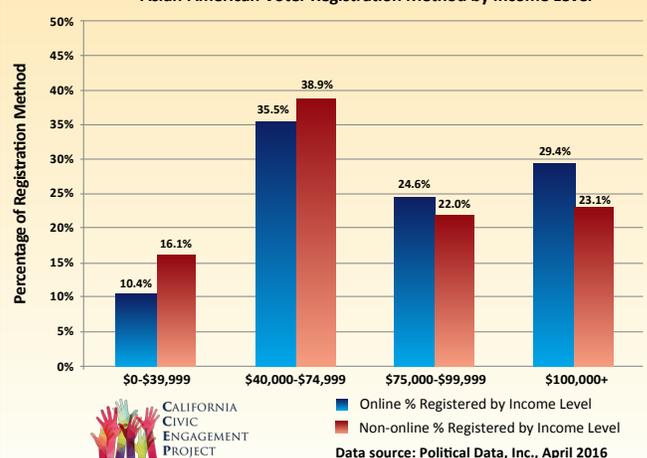


Figure 13 Asian-American Voter Registration Method by Income Level



Online Registration by Party

Before OVR was implemented in California, election analysts wondered whether it would be utilized more by Democrats than members of other parties, and if its implementation might thus benefit the Democratic Party and its candidates.

The data indicate a mixed picture in terms of OVR use by party affiliation. Since OVR was implemented, Democrats have used it more than members of other political affiliations. Forty-two percent of registered Democrats registered online, while 35.4% of Republicans did so and 29.6% of no party preference (NPP) registrants.⁹

Figure 14 shows that 51.7% of online registrants in California are affiliated with the Democratic Party, as compared to 41.1% for non-online registrants. Republican Party members are more evenly distributed between registration types than are their Democratic counterparts. Nearly 20% of OVR users are Republican, while 20.9% of non-online users are Republican. A much larger difference is seen among NPP registrants. Offline registrants are registering as NPP by nearly nine percentage points more than online registrants. However, age appears to be a major determinant of party trends in OVR use. The majority of OVR users are under 34. OVR use by this group is largely Democratic and NPP-affiliated.

As for Latinos, over the past two decades they have registered with the Democratic Party at much higher rates than the general population. Since the implementation of OVR, Latinos registering as Democrats tend to register online more than offline, whereas those registering as Republicans or no party preference tend to register offline, as shown in Figure 15. The party registration gap between online registrants and non-online registrants is larger for Latinos than it is for the total population. Latinos registering with no party preference have comprised a much larger proportion of offline registrants than online registrants.

Over the past decade, party registration for Asian Americans in California has generally skewed strongly toward NPP. But when these figures are broken out by registration method, some differences emerge, as illustrated in Figure 16. Asian-Americans who registered online affiliated less with the Democratic Party (44.8%) than Latinos and the total registrant population. Of Asian Americans registering via non-online methods, there was a 9 percentage point gap between those registering Democratic versus those registering NPP. Furthermore, a third of all Asian-Americans who registered online are NPP.

Figure 14

Voter Registration Method by Party

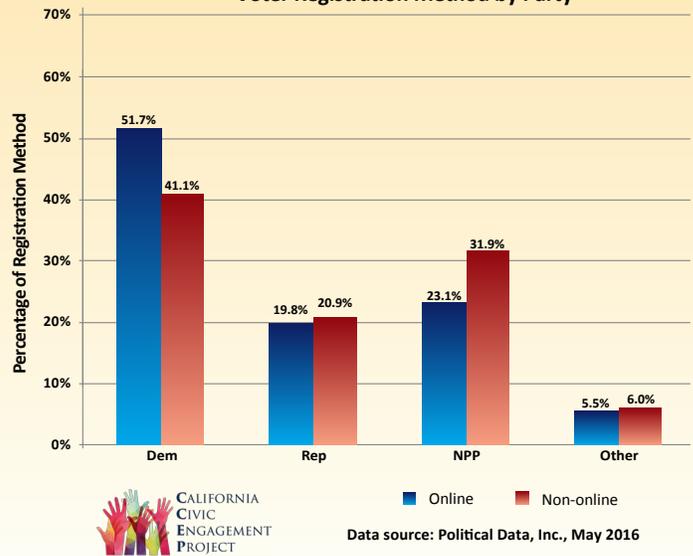


Figure 15

Latino Voter Registration Method by Party

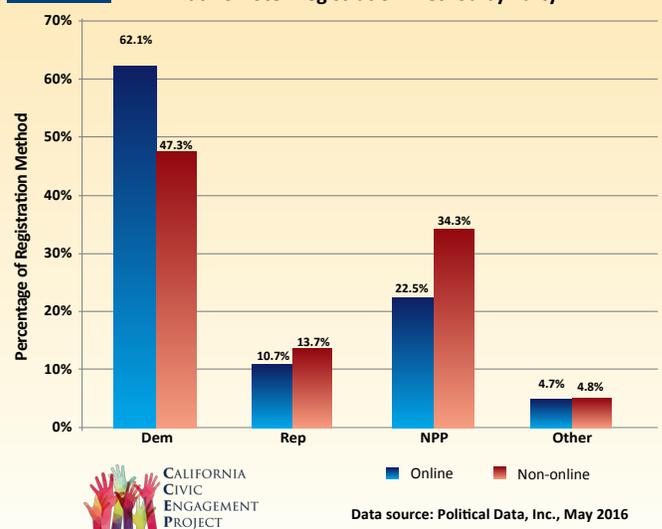
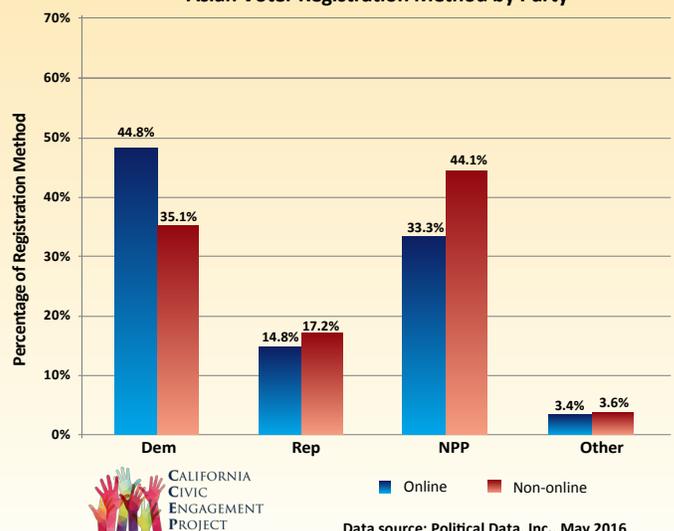


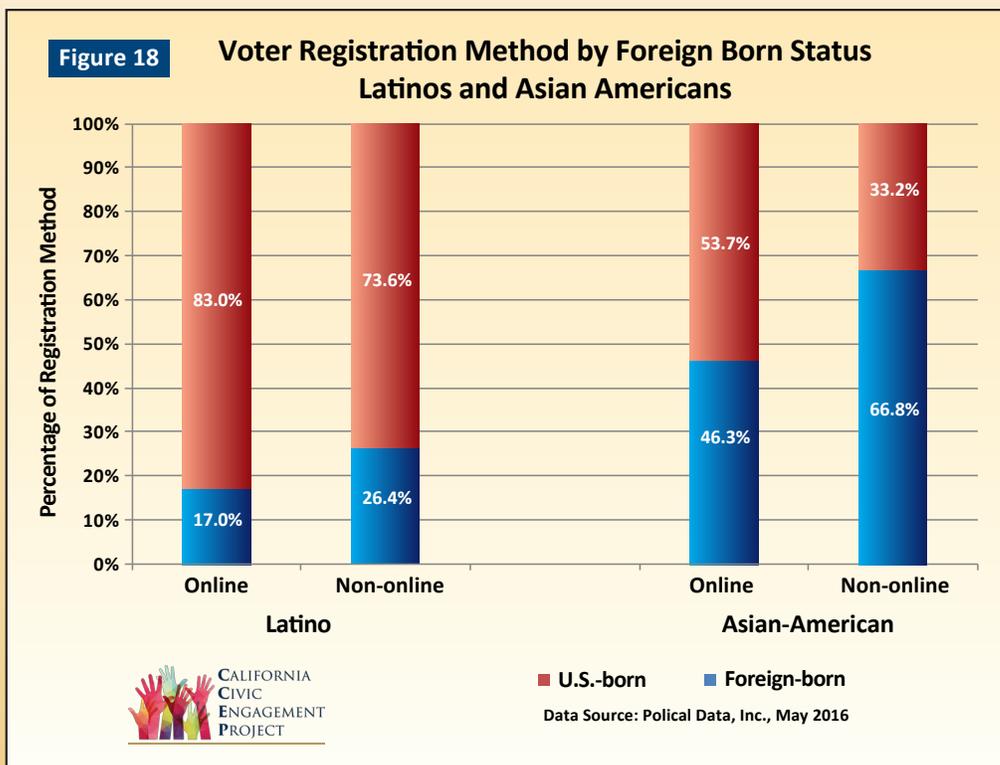
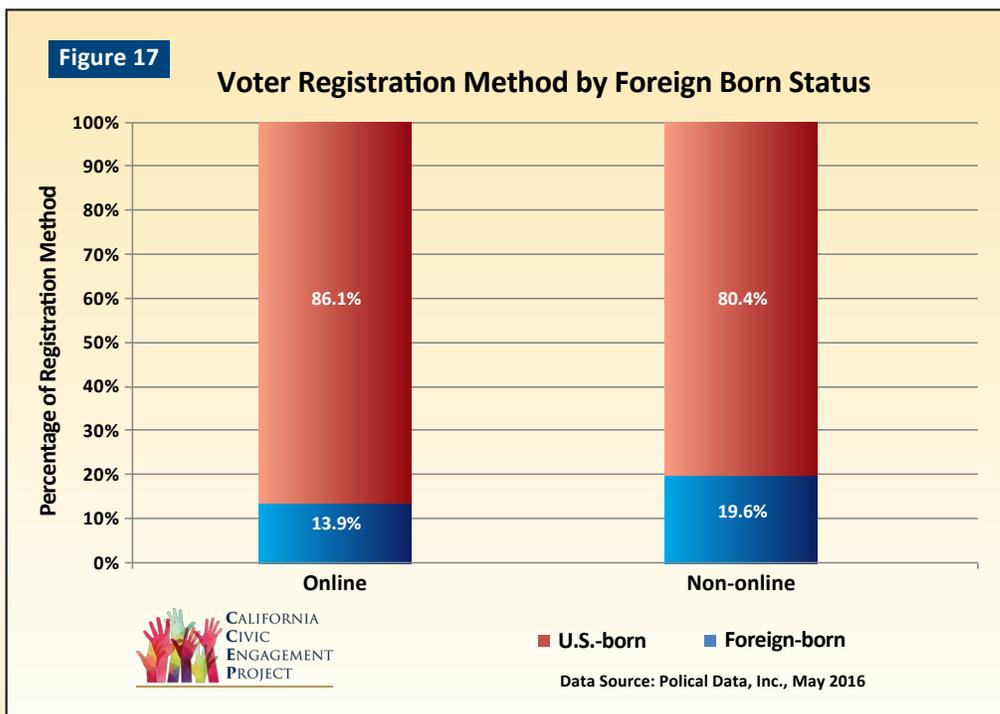
Figure 16

Asian Voter Registration Method by Party



Foreign-born and U.S.-born Registrants

Use of online voter registration differs by a registrant’s foreign born status. Of those registrants who are foreign born, 29.2% chose OVR, whereas, 38.7% of U.S. born registrants used OVR to register. Overall, Figure 17 shows that 13.9% of online registrants are foreign-born, compared to about 19.6% of those not registered online. When we separate out foreign-born status for Latinos and Asian Americans respectively, as shown in Figure 18, we see that fewer Latinos and Asian Americans who registered online are foreign-born, compared with those who registered via another method. Latino registrants, regardless of their registration type, are overwhelmingly U.S.-born, while a majority of Asian-American online registrants are foreign-born.



OVR Use by Organized Voter Registration Groups

In April 2016, the CCEP surveyed 28 organizations that conduct non-partisan voter registration efforts in California as part of their community engagement work. About half of the organizations surveyed use OVR in their registration efforts. All of the organizations that use OVR do so, in large part, for reasons related to convenience and to increase accessibility. At the same time, many of the organizations surveyed reported advantages to using paper registration over OVR. The advantages and disadvantages reported were described as follows:¹⁰

Advantages of OVR

- Avoids errors
- Young people are more comfortable registering online
- Faster processing time with immediate confirmation
- Can utilize social media, email and text messages for registration drives
- Saves paper and doesn't require mailing in a form
- Can be more accessible to people with visual impairment or other disabilities
- Registering voters using a tablet computer is more portable and private than using stacks of paper
- Can select appropriate language without the need for different language forms

Advantages of Paper Registration

- Can be used when technology or Internet isn't available or affordable (most-cited reason)
- Provides organization with record of voter information which can be used for get-out-the-vote efforts
- Can register many people at once without being limited by number of digital devices
- Easier to track how many people were registered
- Faster than registering voters online
- Easier for people who are registering to vote for the first time
- People can take forms with them to register friends & family
- Some people aren't comfortable using computers
- Don't need DMV-issued ID

3. What opportunities are there to further expand the use of OVR?

California's online voter registration system is being used by a large and diverse number of registrants. Although its use appears to fluctuate with election cycles, as does total registration, OVR allows people who find themselves particularly motivated by the dynamics of a given election to quickly get registered. Since the beginning of 2016, Californians who found themselves engaged by elements of the 2016 primary season could quickly search for ways to register to vote and do so immediately while they still felt compelled to act. Before online voter registration was available in California, potential voters who were inspired to participate in an upcoming election might not end up registering due to the inconvenience of needing to find the necessary paper registration form.

For many groups, OVR use rates remain lower, compared to rates for other registration methods. Those in rural communities, people with low income, those ages 18-24, as well as Latinos and Asian Americans all have lower OVR use rates compared to those of the total registrant population. Outreach to each of these groups should be provided with support in using OVR. For them and for others, OVR can be a convenient option with fewer registrant errors than paper registration. Furthermore, expanding access to affordable internet, Wi-Fi, and digital computing devices for these groups is an integral part of making OVR more accessible.

Another significant area of opportunity to expand OVR use in California is through the state's college systems. It is clear that OVR is underutilized by college students. Considering students typically access their campus websites multiple times a week (if not daily) there are likely many more high traffic webpages where OVR web links could be embedded and promoted on campus websites in order to increase student voter registration. Voter registration rates for Californians age 18-24 are consistently very low (typically only about 50% of those age 18-24 who are eligible to vote are registered).¹¹ While young people clearly are comprising large segments of OVR users in California, there are still many unregistered young people who could have a voice in the political process if they were encouraged to take advantage of OVR via their college websites. In order to increase voter registration of students (by any method), California's college systems should adopt policies that support nonpartisan voter registration, education and mobilization efforts by student organizations and election officials.

The success of online voter registration as an election reform in California provides a significant example of how technology can help expand the electorate by bringing the electoral process to people while addressing the realities of their busy lives and schedules. The convenience of OVR, along with a more politically engaged population has come together in the 2016 election cycle to produce an unprecedented surge of OVR users that will likely impact the size and make-up of those who turnout to vote in upcoming elections.

Coming soon

CCEP full report examining the impact of OVR in expanding California's electorate.

Notes

- 1 California Senate Bill 397, effective Jan. 1, 2012, authorized creation of an online voter registration system which was implemented on September 19, 2012. The system allows the entire registration process to occur electronically and be verified against CA Department of Motor Vehicle records. See the California Secretary of State's online voter registration portal: <http://registertovote.ca.gov/>
- 2 Detailed California registration records were acquired from the California Secretary of State's Office and aggregated to the county and state level. Voter registration data were also provided by Political Data, Inc.
- 3 See the California Civic Engagement Project Policy Brief, Issue Four - Online Voter Registration: Impact on California's 2012 Election Turnout by Age and Party Affiliation: <http://explore.regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/publications/ccep/ucdavis-ccep-brief-4-online-voter-turnout-impact>
- 4 For more information on California's Proposition 30, see: http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201120121SCA1
- 5 For more information on the National Voter Registration Act, see: <https://www.justice.gov/crt/national-voter-registration-act-1993-nvra>
- 6 For more information on the California Student Voter Registration Act (SVRA), see: <http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/displaycode?section=elec&group=02001-03000&file=2145-2148>
- 7 Enrollment numbers are for the 2014-2015 academic year. For the University of California system, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_California#cite_note-Campus_Facts-40. For the California State University system, see: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>. For California Community Colleges, see: CC System: <http://www.ccleague.org/files/public/Publications/FF2016.pdf>
- 8 Income is measured as the median household income of the census block in which the registered voter resides. Income data source: American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.
- 9 No Party Preference (NPP) includes all registrants identified in the California Secretary of State's registration records as decline to state or no party preference. We do not present data for "other party" registrants in this brief.
- 10 We conducted an online survey of California organizations that conduct voter registration as some part of their mission. The purpose of the survey was to learn the reasons behind their choice of online versus off-line voter registration methods. Twenty-eight organizations participated in the survey.
- 11 See the California Civic Engagement Project Policy Brief, Issue Nine: California's New Political Realities: The Impact of the Youth Vote on Our Electoral Landscape: http://explore.regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/projects/copy2_of_UCDavisCCEPPolicyBrief92014YouthVote.pdf

Author: Mindy Romero, Ph.D., Founding Director, UC Davis California Civic Engagement Project

Research assistance by Liqi Li and Christopher Yee



Research for a Stronger, More Inclusive Democracy

About the California Civic Engagement Project (CCEP)

In 2011, The California Civic Engagement Project was established at the UC Davis Center for Regional Change to inform the public dialogue on representative governance in California. The CCEP is working to improve the quality and quantity of publicly available civic engagement data by collecting and curating data from a broad range of sources for public access and use. The CCEP is engaging in pioneering research to identify disparities in civic participation across place and population. It is well positioned to inform and empower a wide range of policy and organizing efforts in California to reduce disparities in state and regional patterns of well-being and opportunity. Key audiences include public officials, advocacy groups, political researchers and communities themselves. To learn about the CCEP's national advisory committee, or review the extensive coverage of the CCEP's work in the national and California media, visit our website at <http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ccep>.

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For more information about this research study and the California Civic Engagement Project, contact Mindy Romero, CCEP Director, at 530-665-3010 or msromero@ucdavis.edu.

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