

Disparities in California's Uncounted Vote-by-Mail Ballots: Youth, Language Preference and Military Status

The California Civic Engagement Project (CCEP) recently published an issue brief examining reasons for Vote-by-Mail (VBM) ballot rejection in the state of California and the methods taken at the county level to help voters correct VBM ballot issues.¹ Utilizing detailed voter registration data from 36 California county election offices, this brief breaks down the analysis of the state's rejected ballots by age, language preference and military status for the 2012 General Election.² Key findings include the following:

Youth and non-English language voters are more likely to experience VBM ballot rejection.

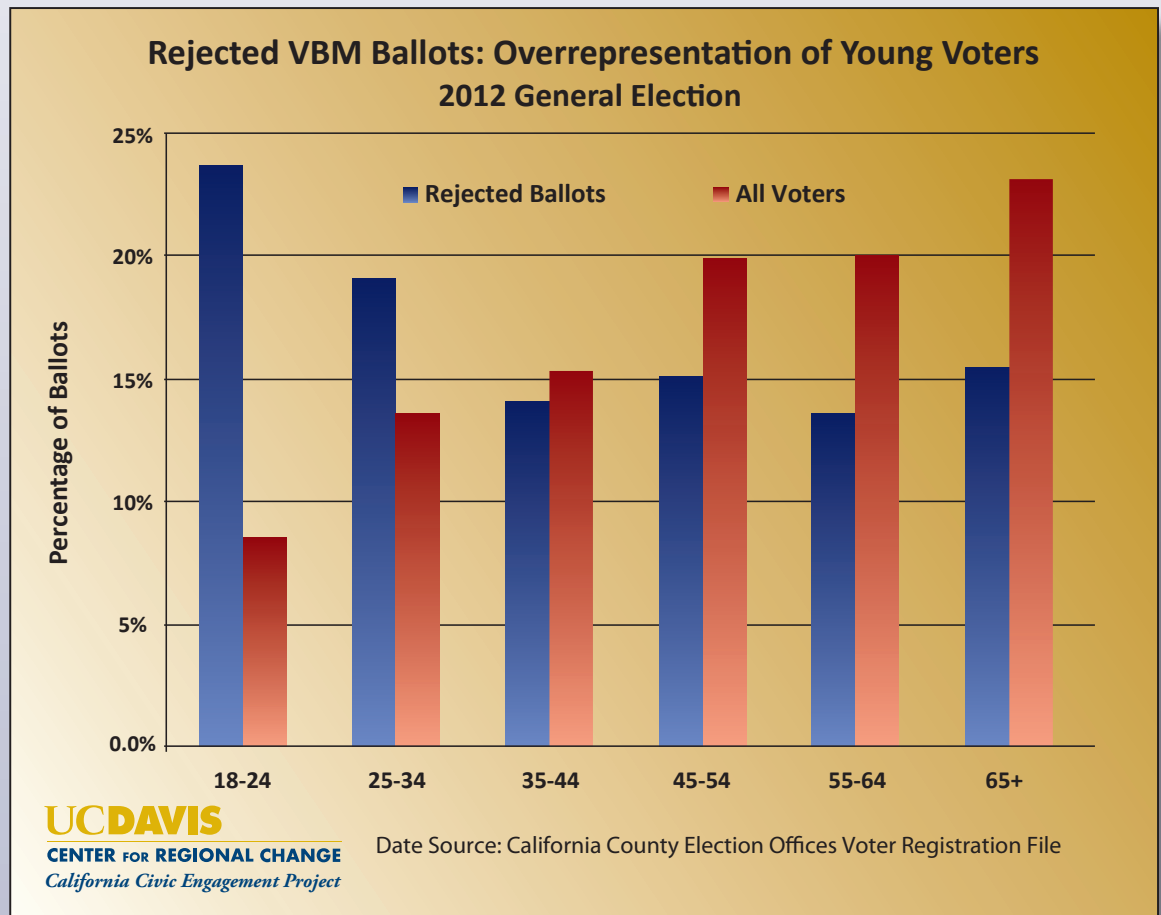
Missing signatures are a major reason non-English ballots are rejected.

Military and overseas voters experience a higher likelihood their VBM ballots will go uncounted.

Youth More Likely to Experience VBM Rejection

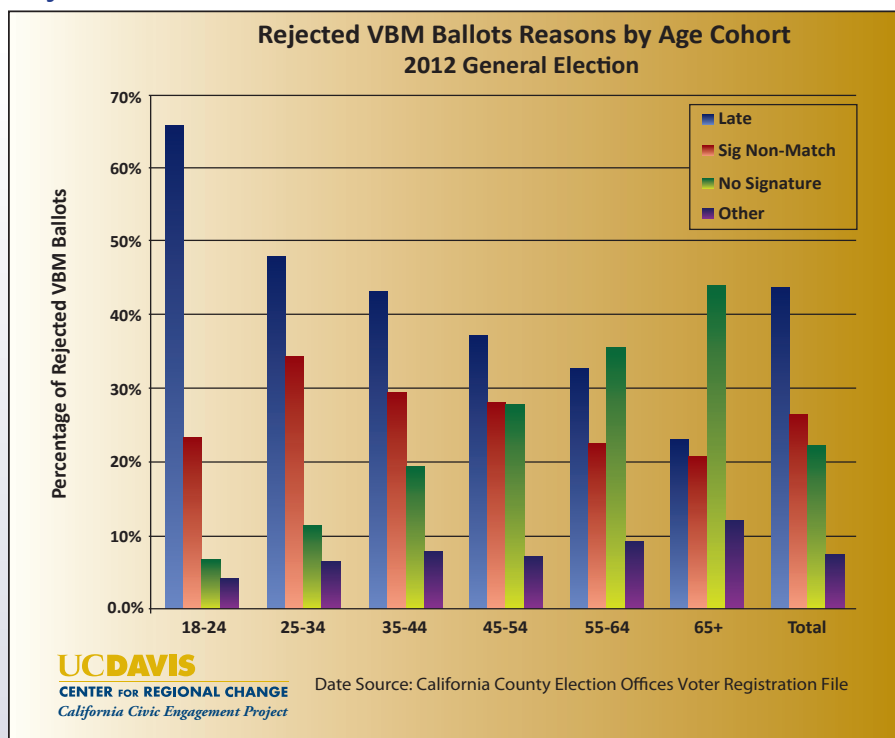
California's youth were more likely to have their vote-by-mail ballots rejected versus older voters.

In November 2012, nearly 69,000 VBM ballots, or 1% of the state's total VBM ballots were rejected by county election offices, effectively disenfranchising these voters. VBM ballots are rejected by county election offices for a variety of reasons. In our CCEP VBM issue brief, California's Uncounted Vote-by-Mail Ballots: Identifying Variation in County Processing, we found the three most common reasons are: ballot arrived late, ballot envelope signature not-matching and no signature.³ However, not all age groups have the same likelihood of their vote-by-mail ballots being rejected and going uncounted.



Young (age 18-24) voters comprise a disproportionately large share of rejected ballots compared to their share of all votes cast (VBM ballots and polling place ballots combined). Twenty-three percent of the rejected VBM ballots in California's 2012 General Election belonged to youth voters, while youth voters make up only 8.1% of all votes cast (counted and rejected combined). The largest absolute number of rejected VBM ballots of any age group were from young VBM voters.

Rejected Youth VBM Ballots are Late



A higher proportion of rejected youth VBM ballots were uncounted because they arrived too late at county election offices versus rejected ballots from non-youth. Sixty-five percent of rejected youth VBM ballots were late in 2012, while 23% of rejected VBM ballots belonging to youth were not counted due to a non-matching signature. Just under 7% of youth ballots were rejected due to not having a signature at all.

In contrast, a greater proportion of older voters' rejected VBM ballots are from missing signatures than from arriving late. The most common reason for the VBM ballots of older voters to be rejected is a lack of signature. Thirty-four percent of 55 to 64 year-olds' rejected VBM ballots and 44% of those 65 plus were not counted due to a missing signature.

Despite a lower proportion of their rejected ballots being attributed to non-matching signatures, more youth are having difficulty with non-signatures than most other age groups. Young VBM voters

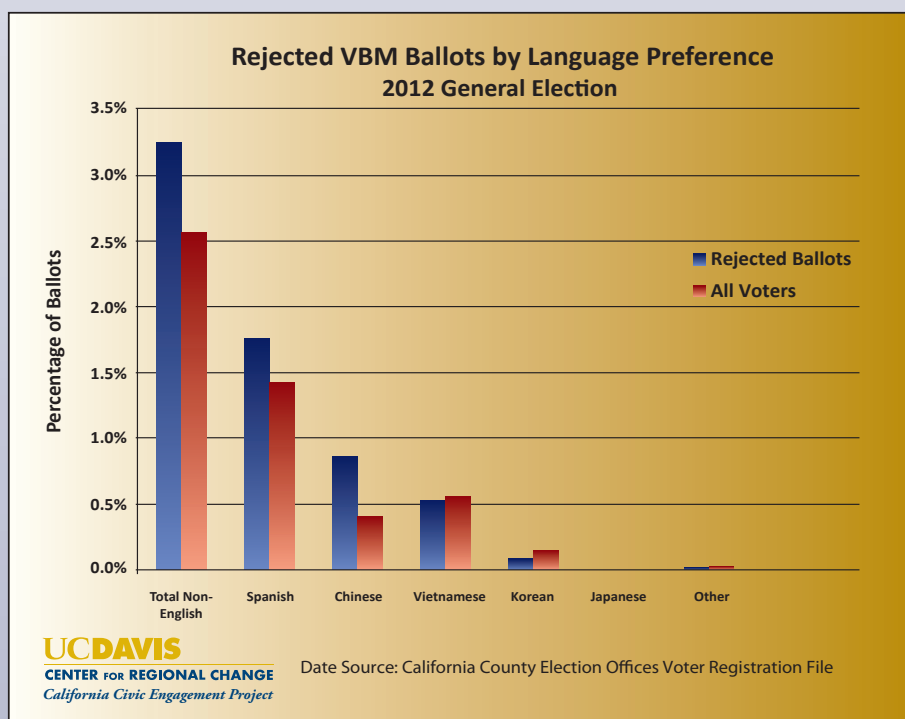
experienced the second largest absolute number of rejected VBM ballots due to signature non-matches of all age groups in the 2012 General Election. Voters age 25 to 34 experienced the largest absolute number of ballots rejected due to non-matching signatures.

Non-English Language Ballots More Likely to be Rejected

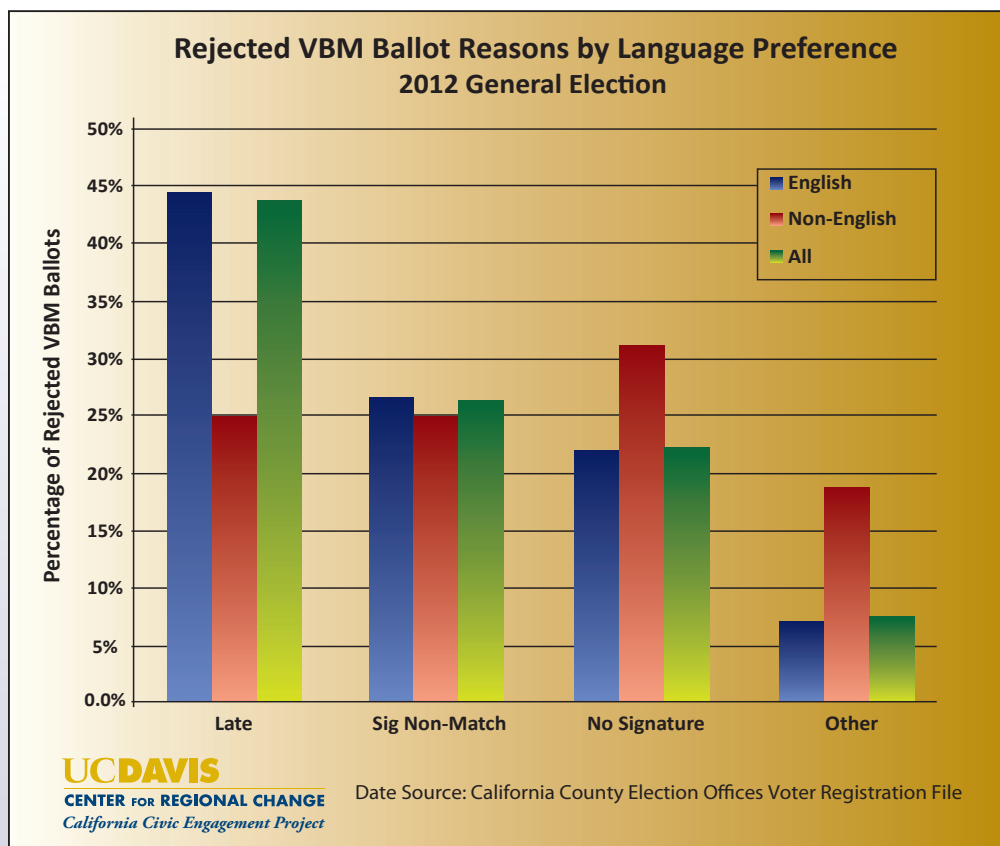
Voters who indicated a preference for ballot materials in a language other than English experienced a higher VBM ballot rejection rate than voters with English language ballots. In the November 2012 election, voters with non-English language ballots were just over 2.5% of all votes cast. At 3.3%, they were a slightly higher percentage of rejected VBM ballots in the election. Broken out by specific language, Spanish language ballots make up the largest proportion of rejected non-English language VBM ballots (Spanish language voters are also the largest segment of non-English). The other most common language groups, except Vietnamese and Korean, are also slightly overrepresented in rejected VBM ballots.

Note: Indicating a language preference (on a voter registration card or by calling an election office) is optional for voters. Nearly all voter records examined in this study have a language preference designated in their county voter file. Counties use English as the default language in the voter file

when no language is specified by the voter. Data presented here for English-language voters likely includes some voters who may prefer a non-English ballot but have not specified this preference with their county election offices.



Missing Signature a Major Reason for Rejection of Non-English Ballots



The frequency of VBM ballot rejection reasons varies for English versus non-English VBM ballots.

Lateness was overwhelmingly the number one reason English language VBM ballots were rejected in November 2012, but this was not the case for non-English language VBM ballots. Not having a signature was the most common reason a non-English language VBM ballot was rejected. Thirty-one percent of all rejected non-English language VBM ballots were uncounted due to missing a signature. Another 19% of non-English language VBM ballots went uncounted due to typically unusual occurrences such as a wrong ballot envelope, a ballot not inside a VBM envelope, or un-cast ballots returned by a family members. These types of unusual rejection reasons appear to be greater issues for non-English language voters.

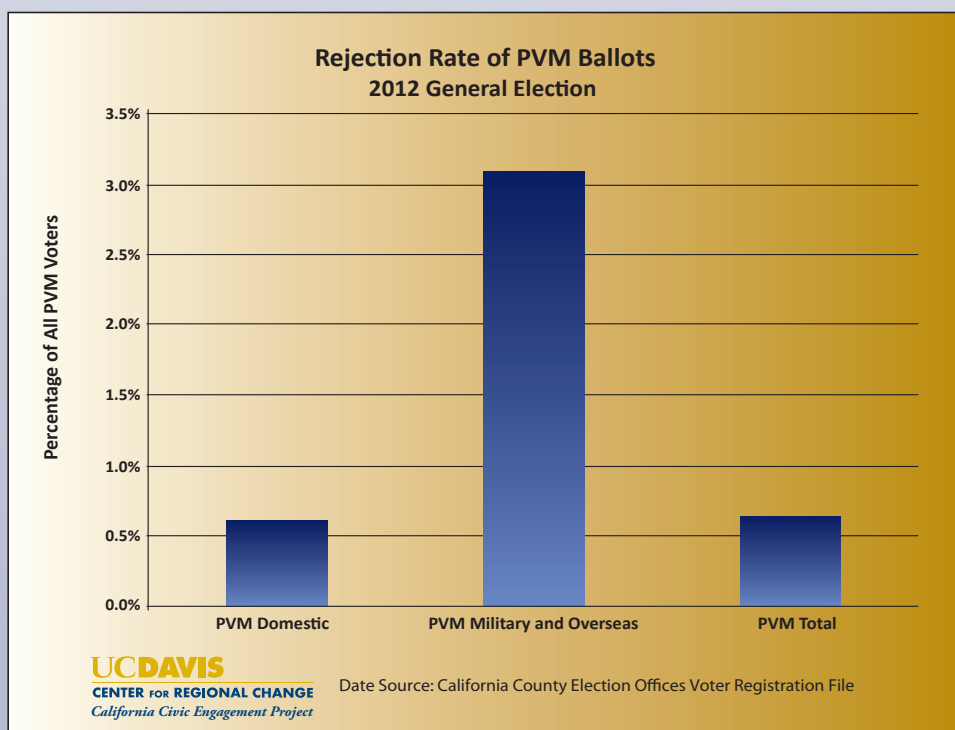
Military and Overseas Ballots More Likely to be Rejected

Military and overseas voters experience a higher likelihood their VBM ballots will go uncounted versus PVM domestic voters.

California voters signed up as permanent vote-by-mail voters (PVM) were 49% of all ballots casts in the 2012 General Election. Eighty-three percent of all returned VBM ballots were from PVM voters; 80% from domestic PVM voters and 3% from military and overseas voters PVM voters. 0.06% of domestic PVM ballots were rejected compared with 3.1% of military and overseas ballots rejected.

Data for military and overseas ballots include ballots both mailed and faxed to their county election offices as allowed under California law.

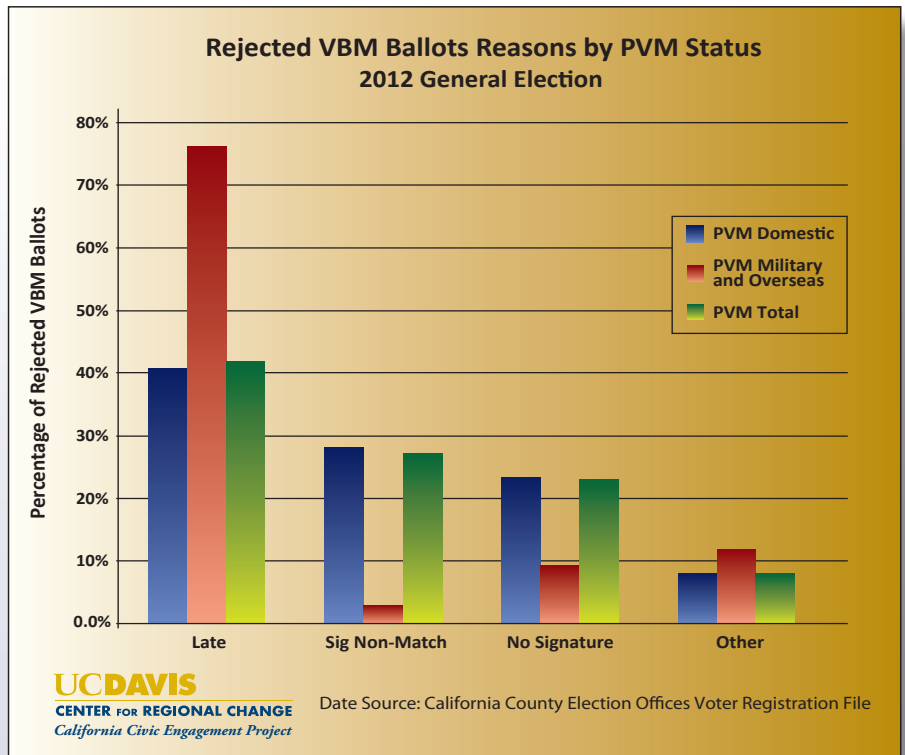
Note: Detailed voter data on rejected ballots was not available from some counties with large military populations. See notes.



Military and Overseas Ballots are Late

The overwhelming majority of military and overseas ballots were rejected because they were late.

In the 2012 General Election, California PVM voters experienced differences in the reasons their ballots were rejected based on whether they were domestic voters or if they were military (serving stateside or abroad) or civilian overseas voters. Seventy-six percent of all rejected military and overseas ballots were late compared with just 40.5% of rejected PVM domestic ballots. Nearly 12% of rejected military and overseas ballots combined went uncounted due to other types of reasons. As was the case for non-English language ballots, these other types of rejection reasons appear to be a greater issue for military and overseas voters. Signature issues appear to be less of a factor in ballot rejection for military and overseas voters.



Actions for November 2014 and Beyond

This study's findings reveal that there are age, language and group membership disparities in mail ballot rejection rates and for the top reasons for ballot rejection. Voters who were young, utilized non-English language ballots, or who were serving in our military or residing overseas all experienced higher VBM ballot rejection rates in the 2012 General Election. These voters also experienced different frequencies for the reasons VBM ballots were rejected compared to the general population of VBM ballots.

All VBM voters should be educated about the steps they need to take to ensure their ballots are counted. The development of voter education campaigns should consider the differences in VBM rejection reasons by age, language preference and military status found in this report; young and military/overseas voters are experiencing more issues with late ballots, while older voters and voters with non-English language ballots would appear to benefit from an emphasis on ballot signature awareness. Further, nearly every group examined in this study is experiencing a notable proportion of ballot rejections due to non-matching signatures.

On January 1, 2015, Senate Bill 29 will become law allowing VBM ballots to be counted if they are received within three days after election day and are postmarked, time stamped or date stamped on or before election day. Once implemented, SB 29 is expected to significantly reduce the number of VBM ballots not counted by counties due to lateness. While future elections will reveal what SB 29's full impact will be on the state's rejection rate, late VBM ballots should remain a high concern for the November 2014 election given the CCEP's research findings.

Rejection issues due to signature non-match also remain a concern for VBM ballot rejection going forward. Since counties rely on voter signature images to verify the identity of voters, the quality of these images needs to be high in order to lessen the likelihood of error in the ballot verification process. Currently, images on file in county election offices can sometimes not compare to those on vote-by-mail ballot envelopes received from voters due to changes in voters' signatures over time or because the initial images (typically from voter registration cards) were not a high quality or did not accurately represent a voter's signature. Signature images from voters registered through California's new online voter registration system are currently pulled from the Department of Motor Vehicles. DMV images can often be older and poor quality (often made on a signature pad with a stylus) and not representative of voters' current signatures. As online voter registration becomes an increasingly utilized option for voters in California, future research will need to examine any impacts on the state's rejection rates that occur due to non-matching signatures from DMV images.

NOTES

- ¹ See the California Civic Engagement Project's Issue Brief #2: California's Uncounted Vote-by-Mail Ballots: Identifying Variation in County Processing. <http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/UCDavisVotebyMailBrief2.pdf>
- ² In order to examine California VBM rejection rates broken by age, language preference and military status we utilized detailed voter registration data files collected from California county election offices. Fifty-five counties supplied data files but data on returned VBM ballots (challenged ballots) were only available from 34 counties: Alpine, Butte, Calaveras, Colusa, Fresno, Humboldt, Inyo, Kern, Lake, Lassen, Madera, Marin, Mariposa, Merced, Mono, Napa, Orange, Plumas, Riverside, Sacramento, San Benito, San Bernardino, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, Shasta, Sierra, Sonoma, Sutter, Tehama, Tulare, Ventura, and Yuba. These counties hold 41.9% % of the state's registered voter population. Returned ballot data (challenged ballots) is not available in the detailed voter files of the remaining state's counties. The total number of challenged examined in this sample was 25,106. The total number of all challenged ballots in California in the 2012 general election was 68,759.
- ³ See the California Civic Engagement Project's Issue Brief #2: California's Uncounted Vote-by-Mail Ballots: Identifying Variation in County Processing. <http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/UCDavisVotebyMailBrief2.pdf>

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This research is designed and conducted as a collaboration between the Future of California Elections (FOCE) and the UC Davis California Civic Engagement Project (CCEP).

This project is supported through a grant from The James Irvine Foundation.



About the Future of California Elections (FOCE):

The Future of California Elections (FOCE) is collaboration between election officials, civil rights organizations and election reform advocates to examine and address the unique challenges facing the State of California's election system. FOCE was formed in late 2011 to examine and address the unique challenges facing the State of California's election system. In 2013 and beyond, FOCE will be focused on building on this foundation of consensus and success.

About the California Civic Engagement Project (CCEP):

In 2011, the UC Davis Center for Regional Change established the California Civic Engagement Project (CCEP) 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 and state advisory committee, or review the extensive coverage of the CCEP's work in California's media, visit our website at: <http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ccep>

About the Center for Regional Change

Launched in 2007, the CRC is a catalyst for innovative, collaborative, and action-oriented research. It brings together faculty and students from different disciplines, and builds bridges between university, policy, advocacy, business, philanthropy and other sectors. The CRC's goal is to support the building of healthy, equitable, prosperous, and sustainable regions in California and beyond. Learn more! Visit the CRC website at <http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu>

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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Revised 11/1/2014