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Many Groups Continue to be Underrepresented in Voter Rolls Despite Voter Boom



by [Kiley Russell, Bay City News Foundation](#) November 29, 2019



More than 3 million additional Californians will be able to cast a ballot in the upcoming presidential primary thanks to a groundswell of interest that has built up over the past three years.

But voting rights activists are still worried about the persistent, and in some cases extremely large, gaps in voter participation based on race and ethnicity – especially in the Bay Area.

In a recent conference call with reporters, California’s top election official announced that a record number of voters have registered in anticipation of the March 2020 presidential primary, but independent data shows Asian Americans and other groups continue to lag behind.

More than 20.3 million Californians were registered to vote as of Oct. 1, the date for which the latest voter registration data was compiled –

that's more than 3 million additional registered voters since the 2016 primary, according to Secretary of State Alex Padilla.

The number of registered voters now accounts for 80.6 percent of the state's roughly 25.2 million eligible adults – a percentage of potential voter participation not seen in California since 1952, when the state's voters chose Republican presidential candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower over rival Democrat Adlai Stevenson.

“The numbers are showing us that clearly the policies and outreach that we've engaged in to facilitate voter registration are successful,” Padilla said.

Despite the good news for overall voter registration, however, not everyone is equally represented in the voter rolls – much to the alarm of some long-time observers of California's political landscape.

“We have consistently found in our polling that there are significant gaps between the make-up of the population and the numbers in participation by race and ethnicity and income groups,” said Mark Baldassare, president and CEO of the Public Policy Institute of California, a nonpartisan policy research organization.

There's no question that the Secretary of State's office and the Legislature have implemented policies that have increased registration and voter participation in recent years, Baldassare said.

For example, the state's “motor voter” rules and online voter registration are helping get more people signed up to participate in the election process, Padilla said, and in 2020, same-day voter registration is coming to California.

For newly minted American citizen Haylie Ma, the prospect of registering to vote online has indeed increased the likelihood that she will participate in the upcoming presidential primary.

The 29-year-old San Leandro resident, originally from China, took the oath of citizenship last October, but it wasn't until a friend approached her asking for a signature to help place a local school bond on the ballot that she became determined to participate in her new country's electoral process.

“Last weekend one of my friends asked me to sign something to help a school get more funding,” Ma said. “She assumed I registered to vote and I realized I have to register to vote.”

Ma said the online option seems easiest since she won't have to trek down to the Department of Motor Vehicles or find, fill out and mail in a paper form.

Persistent Gaps Remain in Voter Participation

Still, despite the state's efforts to make the registration process more accessible, political observers say additional measures are necessary to help close the gaps in voter participation.

“But based on our most recent analysis, there are wide differences (in voter participation based on race and income) and millions of people are left out of the process,” Baldassare said.

According to a September PPIC report, the white population is over-represented among likely voters statewide. They make up 42 percent of the adult population but 58 percent of likely voters, while Latinos make up 35 percent of the adult population and 19 percent of likely voters.

The report, “California's Exclusive Electorate,” notes that Asian Americans are slightly under-represented statewide and African Americans are proportionately represented among likely voters.

In the Bay Area, while voters turned out in solid numbers for the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections, Asian and Pacific Islanders were least likely to cast a ballot, with just 39 percent of eligible Asian adults in the region showing up for the 2016 contest and 35 percent for the 2012 election. That compares with more than 60 percent of all eligible adults in those contests, according to data from the Bay Area Equity Atlas, a project dedicated to quantifying the metrics of inequality in the region.

Jonathan Stein, staff attorney and program manager for Asian Americans Advancing Justice/Asian Law Caucus' Voting Rights and Census Program, said he's not surprised by the poor turnout at the polls.

"Generally, a lot of people think of Asian Americans as doing well and thriving in the U.S., but I think what people fail to realize is that economic integration and residential integrating does not necessarily equal political integration," Stein said.

"When people hear that Latinos don't vote, they're not surprised," Stein said. "When I tell people that Asian Americans vote at low rates, they're stunned."

The Systemic Barriers to Full Political Participation

One of the reasons for the gap appears to be that roughly 70 percent of California's API (Asian and Pacific Islander) community immigrated here in the previous generation, Stein said.

“Political participation is a multi-generational habit,” Stein said. “If you see your parents vote, you’re dramatically more likely to vote, but if you come from a family with zero experience in the political process you have to build that habit on your own.”

Ma, who said she didn’t have much experience in the political life of her former country, said many of her friends and family in the U.S. aren’t registered to vote and don’t typically discuss political issues. “In my family, it’s easy to get into an argument with stuff like this,” Ma said.

Also, about three of every four Asian Americans speak a language other than English at home and roughly a third identify as limited English-proficient, Stein said. That makes it more likely that API residents will face significant language barriers when trying to access all sorts of public services and institutions, including elections.

For example, in 2015, 30.3 percent of all East Asian households in the Bay Area reported possessing limited English language skills, as did nearly 33 percent of Chinese households, about 31 percent of Thai households and a little more than 29 percent of Taiwanese households, according to the Equity Atlas.

“Elections offices do what is legally required of them and very infrequently do anything more,” Stein said. “They see language access as a matter of legal compliance and not a matter of building a truly multi-lingual democracy.”

Another possible barrier is related to the observation that many Asian Americans are immigrants from countries like Vietnam, China, Cambodia and Iran that have no history of political participation or where voicing political opinions can be a particularly dangerous activity.

“If that’s your background, you’re naturally less inclined to step forward and make your voice heard in the political process,” Stein said.

Immigrants of color also typically face some of the same systemic obstacles to full political participation that are stacked against low-income communities, Stein said.

“We segregate by color and low-income through legacies of red-lining and housing policies,” he said. “That has the secondary impact of putting lower-turnout communities together. It becomes natural to not vote.”

Additionally, low-income voters of all races are often dealing with the daily struggles inherent to living in poverty.

“I’ve done focus groups around voting and talking to people who are non-voters and one of the things you often hear (is that) non-voters are more economically stressed and there are things going on day-to-day that make it truly difficult to find the time to register and vote,” Baldasarre said.

The Interplay of Race and Class

Roy Wilson, executive director of the Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Center in Oakland, said there is a lack of robust civic participation in all marginalized communities and that class is “just as or more important” than race when it comes to predicting who will register and turn out on election day.

Wilson said that, in his experience, affluent African American and white families in the Oakland hills, for example, demonstrate the same propensity to vote and participate in the city’s civic life.

“If you come down the hill, race is not the main criteria,” Wilson said, referring to areas with fewer resources. “You find single mothers – white, black or brown – in East Oakland working two jobs or on public assistance are much less involved in the civic opportunities. They don’t go to the kid’s schools, they’re not involved in the PTA, not involved in community organizations.”

Wilson, whose organization works in 27 school districts to build students’ leadership skills and increase civic participation, said that most children aren’t being taught about the nation’s collective civic life and the responsibilities of citizens as voters.

“We’ve lost civic education and we’ve lost even a formal presentation of citizenship, in other words social studies and history that in the main had curriculum that revealed the character of civic participation,” Wilson said.

Additionally, the lack of robust voter education campaigns, as opposed to voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives, result in people being confused about the process and the issues and leads to widespread voter apathy, Wilson said.

Compounding this is a phenomenon that Stein said has “this weird impact with Asian Americans particularly,” namely that they report being contacted by political parties less than any other racial group.

Since Asian Americans historically have not shown a uniform political party affiliation and register to vote with no party preference more than any other racial group, the nation’s main parties see them as “unreliable voters,” Stein said.

And while Asian Americans are becoming increasingly identified with Democrats, particularly among young voters and in presidential elections, many are willing to vote Republican in local and state contests.

“In the eyes of the party, that makes them unreliable or not worth the outreach,” Stein said. “For those of us who are politically active, it seems insane that you can go through a political season without being contacted.”

Continued Outreach, Education Needed

In addition to the vigorous and sustained voter education efforts called for by Wilson, Stein said bridging language barriers would go a long way toward helping immigrant communities become full participants in the political process.

“I think election offices need to step up and invest in hiring staff that come from the communities and speak all the relevant languages in the community,” Stein said. “They need to form a human connection with limited-English speaking voters and Asian American immigrant voters.”

Overall, the numbers have been going in the right direction in terms of closing some of the gaps between voters based on race, ethnicity and income.

“But there is still a lot of work to do,” Baldassare said.