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Closing the Gap: An Examination on if the Voters Choice Act (VCA) Amplifies Asian American Voter Engagement

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**"Closing the Gap: An Examination on if the Voters Choice Act (VCA) Amplifies Asian
American Voter Engagement"**

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Introduction

In 2016, Senate Bill 450 created the Voter's Choice Act (VCA), a reform aimed at modernizing elections in California to make the voting process more flexible and convenient for voters ("California Voter's Choice Act", 2024). The Voter's Choice Act enables California counties to conduct elections by mail, with provisions for vote centers and special elections, while requiring oversight from the Secretary of State and establishing a task force to review election processes ("California Voter's Choice Act", 2024). It also includes changes to the Elections Code and addresses reimbursement procedures for local agencies and school districts ("California Voter's Choice Act", 2024). In 2018, 5 counties—Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento, and San Mateo—adopted the VCA as part of its initial pilot. As of 2024, 29 out of 58 counties in California have adopted the VCA.

The act was created to increase voter accessibility and close the voter participation gap, specifically amongst groups with historically low voter turnout, such as Asian Americans, Latinos, and young voters. This raises the question of whether the VCA has had a tangible impact on minority voter turnout in the counties where it has been implemented. My research will specifically focus on the question: To what extent has the Voters Choice Act been effective in increasing Asian American voter turnout in its implemented counties? I will also be studying if Asian American population size per county influences the voter turnout in VCA counties compared to non-VCA counties.

I tested my hypothesis by comparing Asian American voter turnout in VCA counties to turnout in non-VCA counties over the course of 5 election cycles from 2014 to 2022. I also analyzed the relationship of counties' Asian American population size to their voter turnout. My

research aims to shed light on the VCA's impact on Asian American voter turnout and will produce recommendations for further studies.

Significance

Assessing the efficacy of the VCA in increasing voter turnout is significant because it addresses the pressing issue of the voter participation gap in California. A substantive issue when it comes to increasing voter participation— in local, state and federal elections— is that there are significant barriers accommodating marginalized communities' access to voting material and polling locations. Specifically in California, the proportion of the voting-age population of many communities of color is disproportionate to the percentage of likely voters in the state (Baldassare et al., 2024). The VCA is an example of California voting reform that attempts to close the voter participation gap, and this research aims to reveal how effective this policy has been in sustaining an upward impact on the voter turnout of one such minority voting population—Asian Americans.

Asian Americans represent a significant demographic in California, comprising about 15.5%, 6 million people, of California's population (Vaishnav & Labh, 2023). 2020 U.S. Census data reveals that the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) population grew at the fastest rate of any other ethnic group in California at a profound 25% (Vaishnav & Labh, 2023). Moreover, for the past two decades, AAPIs have been the quickest-growing group of eligible voters in the U.S., with a growth rate of about 15% in the past four years (Budiman, 2024). However, research shows that their voter turnout is not exactly proportional to their substantially growing population in California and the U.S. more broadly. Research conducted by the Center for Inclusive Democracy on minority voter turnout revealed that in the 2020 presidential election, just over half of Asian American eligible voters did not vote. That percentage per state

ranged from over 32% to over 95% (Romero & Meier, 2023). There are many clear obstacles that play a part in this discrepancy, one of which is that a large majority of eligible Asian American voters are first-generation immigrants who may face language barriers when voting or might not be as familiar with the complexity behind the voting process (Bunny et al., 2016). According to results from a survey conducted by the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund in 2016, as many as 60% of Asian Americans in certain ethnic subgroups prefer or need language assistance when voting (Uprety, 2018). Moreover, Asian Americans who speak English and are well acquainted with the democratic process may feel neglected by political candidates and campaigning. Oftentimes, candidates may ignore pertinent issues faced by Asian Americans because of perceptions that the population does not have strong party identification or powerful potential to sway the vote (Bunny et al., 2016).

Research from AAPI Data shows that in recent elections, Asian American voter engagement has substantially risen, with their national voter turnout increasing from 49.3% in 2014 to 59.5% in 2020, the second highest out of all other racial or ethnic groups in the country (Ramakrishnan, 2021). Although Asian American voter turnout has historically been low, it is clear that their engagement in the political process is continually increasing and, therefore, needs to be accommodated as such. Specifically, after the onslaught of Asian American hate crimes and the targeting of Asian-owned small businesses during the pandemic, the population's interest in being politically represented has increased. Thus, it is important to assess, at the state level, whether policies aimed to accommodate Asian American involvement in the voting process are making a noteworthy impact.

Background

The Voter's Choice Act was chaptered and signed into law in 2016 by former Governor Jerry Brown as a collective effort between legislators, voters' rights advocates, and the Secretary of State's office to expand voting options and combat voting barriers for marginalized communities (McGhee et al., 2020).

Each legislative session, there are numerous introduced bills in California that tackle the voting process and could go hand in hand with the VCA to facilitate voter accessibility. During the 2023 legislative session, many bills were introduced to make voting fairer in California, whether that is through equitable redistricting practices or streamlining voting procedures. One such example is Assembly Bill 421, authored by Assemblymember Issac Bryan and signed by Governor Gavin Newsom on October 7, 2023, which aims to simplify ballot language to clarify what voters are deciding as a means of mitigating any misinformation or misunderstandings (Kamal, 2023). Measures such as this that cater to the needs of voters could amplify the impacts of the VCA in election cycles to come.

In the past six years since the VCA's implementation, there has been research on overall voter turnout under the VCA, especially prevalent to the 2020 election and prior. The California Journal of Politics and Policy published research regarding how turnout amongst groups with typically lower voter participation rates—young voters, Latinos, and Asian Americans—was affected by VCA implementation in Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento, and San Mateo counties for the primary and general elections of 2018 (McGhee et al, 2020). They used a comparative study looking at turnout in the original VCA counties compared to non-VCA counties from 2014 to 2018. Their research revealed that when comparing voter participation data from the two election cycles, the overall voter turnout in VCA-implemented counties had a steeper increase than in non-VCA counties (McGhee et al, 2020). However, when they analyzed

the impacts of the reform on the turnout of those with typically lower turnout, they found little evidence of any it worsening or bettering the representativeness of the voter electorate (McGhee et al., 2020). Furthermore, their study suggested that while VCA implementations may have led to an overall increase in voter turnout, the effectiveness of these reforms in addressing participation disparities among marginalized groups remains uncertain.

The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) has published similar research that studies the influence of increased implementation of vote-by-mail under the VCA on overall Californian turnout (Paluch et al, 2020). This research compares data of registered voters in California and their voting behaviors between the 2018 California Primary Election and the 2020 California Primary Election (Paluch et al, 2020). The main findings of the Public Policy Institute of California were that overall turnout was generally higher under the VCA, specifically for voter registrants that stated they preferred in-person voting. Still, voter turnout declined or barely increased for foreign-language registrants who prefer in-person voting and declined for new, younger registrants (Paluch et al, 2020). Moreover, the PPIC research underscores the nuanced impact of increased vote-by-mail implementation under the VCA, revealing variations in turnout trends among different demographic groups, which necessitates further examination for a comprehensive understanding of electoral dynamics.

Overall, the general debate and research regarding voter reform, specifically the VCA, are in relation to whether it is accomplishing one of its stated main goals, which is to encourage minority populations to participate in the electoral process at the state level. Most previous research has revealed that the VCA has had a positive impact on overall voter turnout in the state, but it is still in question if that upward trend has improved the representation of minorities in the electorate.

Theory and Argument

I researched the efficacy of the Voter's Choice Act in increasing Asian American voter turnout in California counties and also analyzed if Asian American population size influences voter turnout. My conceptual hypothesis is that voting reform to reduce barriers relates to increased voter participation amongst minority communities, such as Asian Americans. Additionally, I conceptualized that counties with larger minority populations may experience higher voter turnout for said minority groups. The causal mechanism in my hypothesis suggests that increased accessibility to polling areas, mail-in voting, and other reforms brought into fruition by the VCA should allow people to vote more easily and more efficiently. I theorized this relationship because minority communities, like Asian Americans, are more likely to vote when barriers such as time, financial commitments, or distant polling locations are mitigated. Specific to the Asian American population, a significant reason why the community's average voter turnout rate is low is due to language barriers and lack of accessibility to polling locations; thus, reform that addresses such obstacles could increase voter engagement. As for the relationship between population size and turnout, I assumed that minorities may be more inclined to vote in counties with overall greater diversity and minority representation because they may feel more politically represented, especially on the local level.

My operational hypothesis indicates that Asian American voter turnout will increase across five election cycles in counties where the VCA is implemented, whereas I anticipate a less substantial increase in non-VCA counties. Additionally, I hypothesized that voter turnout would be higher in counties with both a large Asian American population and VCA implementation. The independent variables in my study are the implementation of the VCA in California counties and the size of the Asian American population per county. The dependent variable of my

research is the voter turnout of Asian Americans on a county level. I theorized that both my independent variables, VCA implementation, and Asian American population size, would have a positive relationship with my dependent variable, Asian American voter turnout.

I predicted that there would also be an increase in voter turnout in non-VCA counties too because of pandemic voting patterns and overall increasing trends in national Asian American voter engagement. It is important to address the confounding variables that have influenced voting trends, especially with consideration of the COVID-19 pandemic, when assessing my research. Due to the statewide use of mail-in ballots during the 2020 presidential election, voter turnout increases during that time period are heavily influenced by increased voting accessibility across the board. Moreover, changes in turnout can be influenced by county political affiliations and the dominant political party in both the Congress and the Presidency during each election cycle. Voter turnout trends can also vary heavily depending on ethnic breakdowns and average county income, which are not accounted for in this aggregated data collection. With these factors in mind, I proposed that increases in voter turnout over time would be more pronounced in VCA counties, but the differences would not be substantial.

Research Design

I tested my hypothesis through a large-n comparative study across twenty California counties, comparing their Asian American voter turnout differences across 5 election cycles, and taking into account their VCA implementation status. I specifically studied the twenty counties in California with the largest Asian American populations to narrow down my research to regions that have significantly testable populations. However, amongst these counties with larger Asian American population sizes, the percentages ranged from 7.5% to 38% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). I measured my independent variable of Asian American population size using

data from Index Mundi and the U.S. Census Bureau with statistics from 2023. The counties I studied in order of highest to lowest Asian American population size are included in Figure 1 and 2. I measured my second independent variable, VCA implementation, by classifying these counties into three categories: original VCA counties (implemented in 2018), VCA counties (adopted in 2020 or subsequently), and non-VCA counties. Their classifications can be seen in both Figures 3 and 4. I derived my data regarding VCA status from the California Secretary of State website, which provides a breakdown of if and when counties have adopted the Act (California Secretary of State, 2024).

Figure 1.

County	Asian American Population Size
Santa Clara	38.30%
San Francisco	35.90%
Alameda	31.80%
San Mateo	30%
Orange	21%
Contra Costa	18%
San Joaquin	17%
Sutter	17%
Sacramento	16.90%
Solano	16.20%
Los Angeles	15.40%
Yolo	15%

San Diego	12.60%
Fresno	11%
Napa	8.80%
Placer	8.00%
Merced	7.90%
Ventura	7.90%
San Bernardino	7.80%
Yuba	7.50%

Figure 2.

Asian American Population Size in California Counties

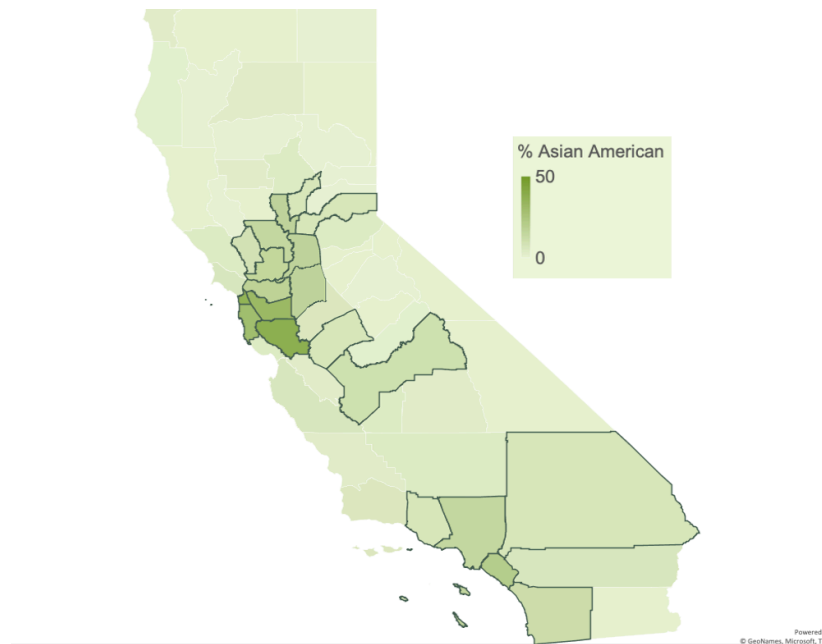
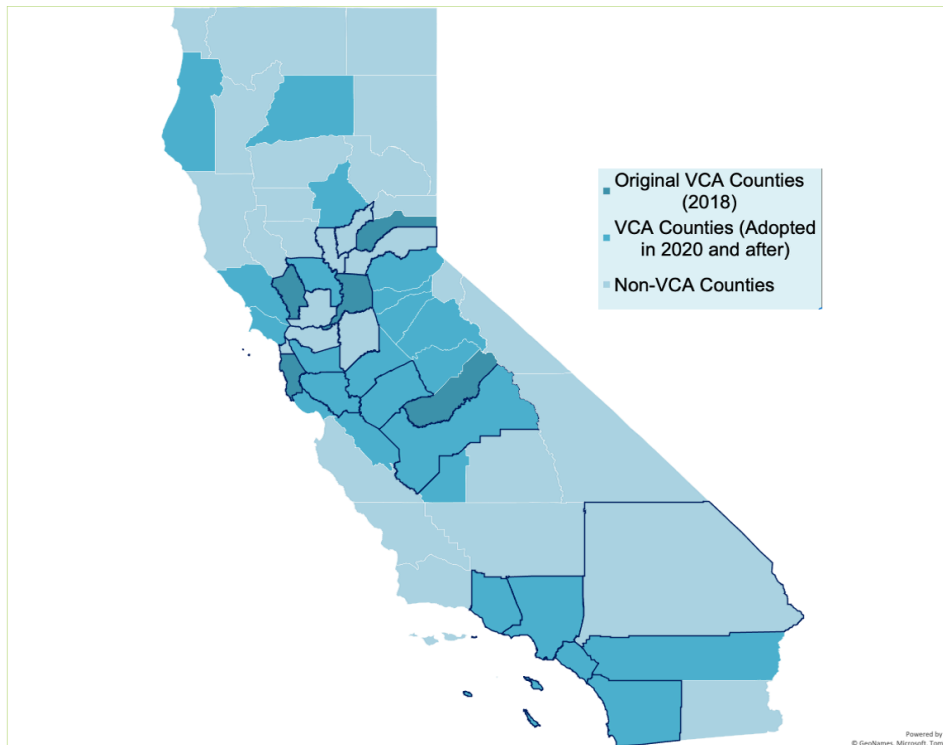


Figure 3

County	VCA Status
San Mateo	Original VCA County (2018)
Sacramento	Original VCA County (2018)
Napa	Original VCA County (2018)
Santa Clara	VCA County (2020)
Alameda	VCA County (2020)
Orange	VCA County (2021)
Los Angeles	VCA County (2020)
Yolo	VCA County (2022)
San Diego	VCA County (2021)
Fresno	VCA County (2020)
Placer	VCA County (2024)
Merced	VCA County (2022)
Ventura	VCA County (2022)
San Francisco	Non-VCA County
Contra Costa	Non-VCA County
San Joaquin	Non-VCA County
Sutter	Non-VCA County
Solano	Non-VCA County
San Bernardino	Non-VCA County
Yuba	Non-VCA County

Figure 4

VCA Status in California Counties



I quantified my dependent variable of Asian American voter turnout through data from the California Statewide Database that provides a county-level breakdown for voter turnout in each election cycle based on different demographics (California Statewide Database, 2023). This data accounts for the turnout of six sub-ethnicities within the Asian American diaspora, including Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, and Filipino individuals. I calculated the percentages for Asian American voter turnout for each county by using data on the total Asian American voting age population per county and year and dividing that by the aggregated voter turnout data for each election cycle. I sourced the data on the total Asian American voting-age population per county and election year from the U.S. Census Bureau (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

I collected data across 5 election cycles from 2014 to 2022, classifying the 2014 and 2016 elections as the pre-VCA period and 2018, 2020, and 2022 as post- VCA. I also distinguished the election cycles based on whether they were midterm or presidential elections to account for the likelihood of greater turnout in presidential elections. Thus, I compared 2016 and 2020 voter turnout data separately from 2014, 2018, and 2022 data.

A limitation to the data collection of my study is the lack of data reported on more sub-ethnicities within the Asian American population. Since the data I was able to find on specific turnout trends per election was limited to a smaller subgroup of the whole Asian American diaspora, my overall findings are skewed to specifically reflect the voter trends of said subgroup. Moreover, I could not find data on voter eligible Asian American population per county and year, so I had to use voting age population data, which likely led to lower percentage totals across the board. This is because the voting age population includes demographics that may not be eligible to vote, such as immigrants, and includes Asian American ethnic subgroups that are not accounted for in the voter turnout totals.

Data and Findings

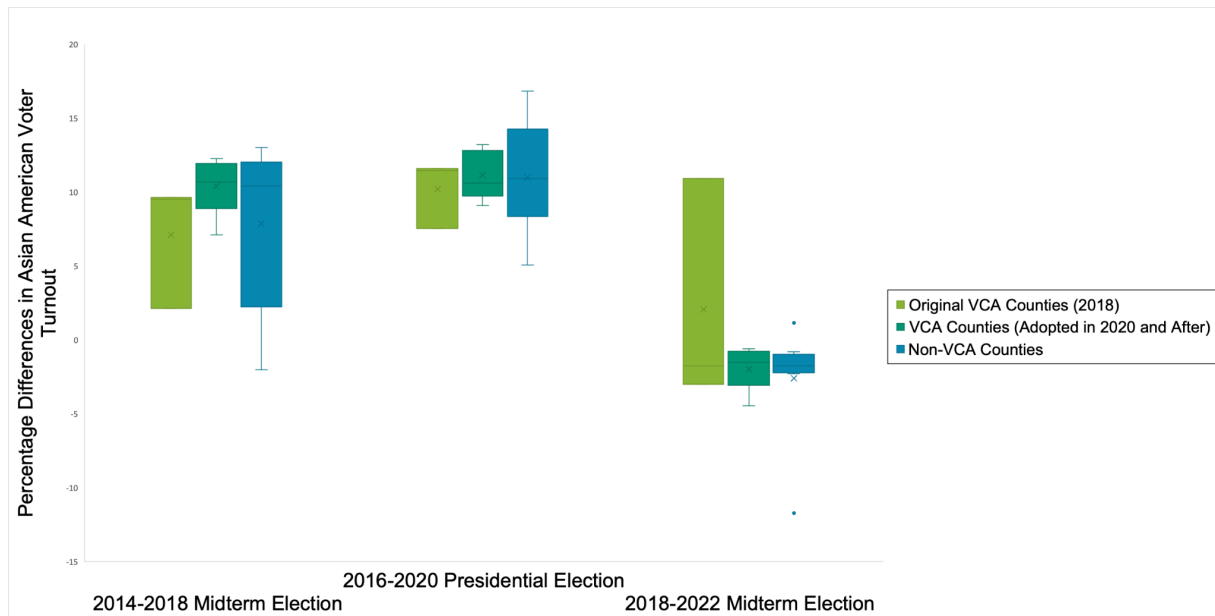
VCA Implementation and Asian American Voter Turnout

To study the relationship between Asian American voter turnout and the VCA, I used the difference in differences method by comparing turnout before and after VCA implementation. More specifically, I found the differences in voter turnout percentages by county from one election cycle to the next. Thus, I found the differences in turnout between 2014 and 2018, 2016 and 2020, and 2018 and 2022. To study the averages amongst midterm election voter turnout changes over time, I also found the differences in turnout from the 2014 and 2022 elections. After I found the differences in voter turnout across cycles, I calculated their averages, in

percentage points, for original VCA counties, VCA counties that adopted in 2020 and after, and non-VCA counties.

Figure 5

Percent Differences in Asian American Voter Turnout Over 5 Election Cycles



As shown in Figure 5, the results concluded that the average voter turnout increased from the 2014 to 2018 midterm elections with 7.1 percentage points for the original VCA counties, 10.4 percentage points for VCA counties that adopted in 2020 and after, and 7.9 percentage points for non-VCA counties. For this comparison, VCA counties that implemented after 2020 have the highest average turnout increase, showing a weak relationship with VCA implementation, as this comparison only accounts for turnout up until 2018. Additionally, non-VCA counties reported a slightly higher average turnout increase than VCA counties by 0.8 percentage points.

When analyzing the 2018 to 2022 midterm elections, the average turnout difference was a 2.0 percentage point increase for the original VCA counties, a 2.0 percentage point decrease for

VCA counties that adopted in 2020 and after, and a 2.6 percentage point decrease for non-VCA counties. The original VCA counties were the only counties that saw an average increase in voter turnout from the 2018 to 2022 midterm elections. VCA counties that adopted the act after 2020 had a slightly lower decrease in turnout than non-VCA counties by 0.6 percentage points. Thus, for both midterm election cycles, there was no significant relationship found between VCA and non-VCA implementation.

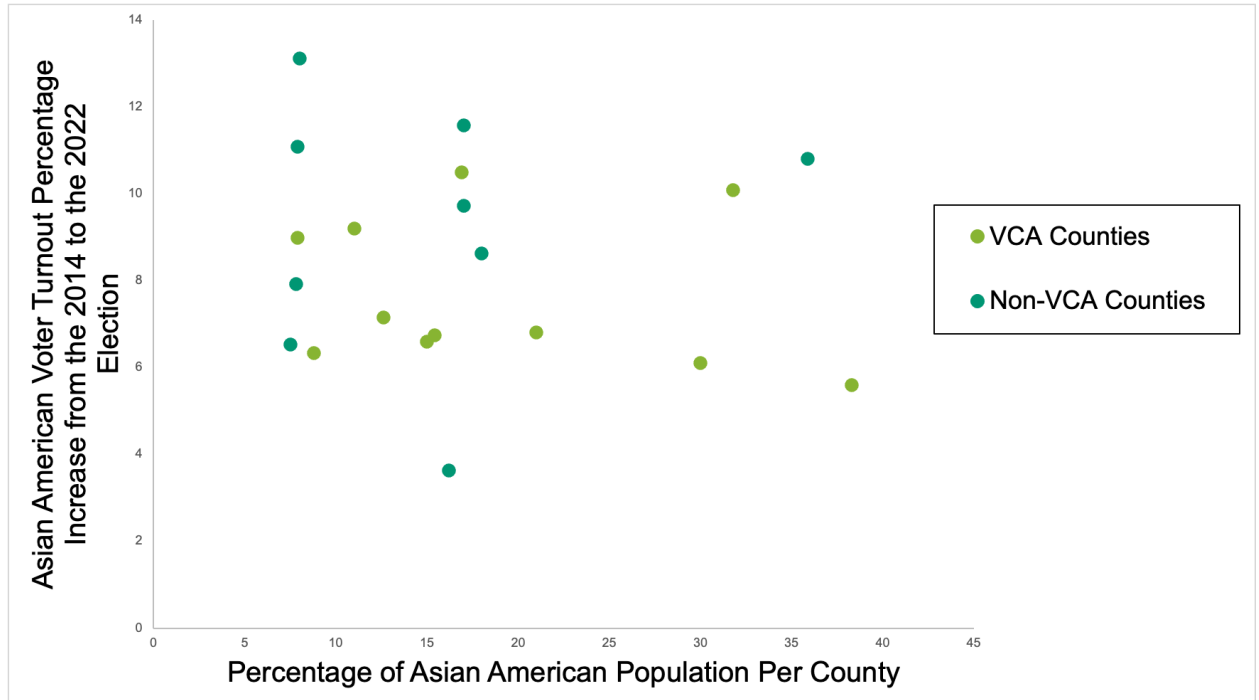
The results found that the average turnout increase from the 2016 to 2020 presidential election was 11.5 percentage points for the original VCA counties, 11.2 percentage points for the other VCA counties, and 11.0 percentage points for non-VCA counties. This reveals that the averages across counties were very similar and that all counties, regardless of VCA implementation, experienced a notable increase in Asian American turnout from 2016 to 2020. So, for presidential elections as well, there was no significant relationship found between the Voter's Choice Act being adopted and Asian American voter turnout.

Asian American Population Size, Voter Turnout, and VCA Implementation

To explore the relationship between the size of the Asian American population and voter turnout per county, I initially categorized the counties into two groups: those with an Asian American population that is greater than 15% and those with an Asian American population that is smaller than 15%. Then, similar to before, I examined the average differences based on VCA status. However, in this instance, I narrowed the categorization down to VCA counties, regardless of implementation year, compared to non-VCA counties and additionally factored in whether the counties had a population size exceeding or falling below 15%. Additionally, when studying midterm election turnout differences, I focused on the broader differences between voter turnout in the 2014 election compared to the 2022 election.

Figure 6

Relationship Of Asian American Population to Voter Turnout Changes (Midterm Elections)

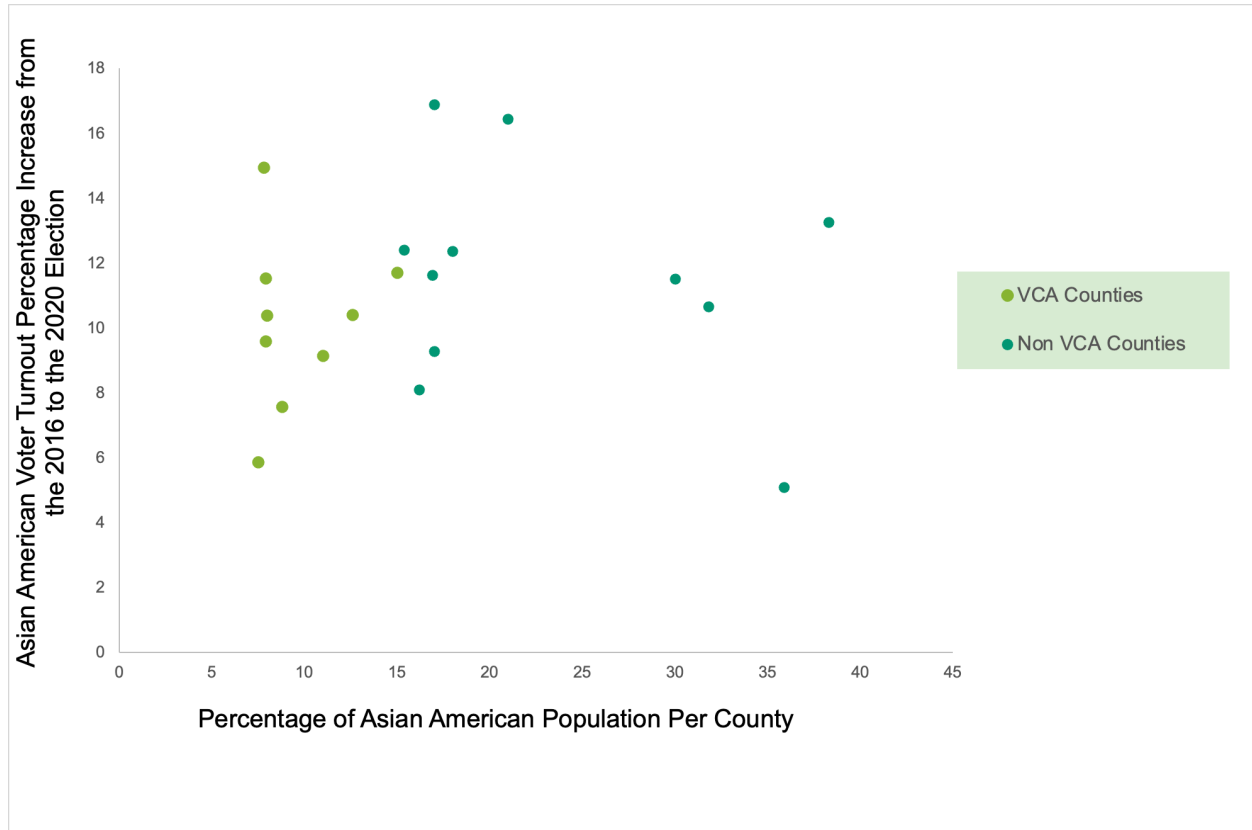


In regards to the midterm election voter turnout analysis, with counties that have an Asian American population size of greater than 15%, the results showed that VCA counties have an average voter turnout increase of about 7.6 percentage points, and non-VCA counties have an average increase of 8.9 percentage points. This reveals that with counties that have a larger Asian American population size, non-VCA counties saw a slightly higher increase in voter turnout than VCA counties by 1.2 percentage points. When analyzing counties with less than 15% Asian American population size, VCA counties had an average of a 7.7 percentage point increase, and non-VCA counties had an average of a 9.7 percentage point increase. Thus, in counties with an Asian American population of less than 15%, non-VCA counties still saw a slightly higher percentage increase in turnout from 2014 to 2018, than VCA counties by 2 percentage points. Overall, the data reveals that in the studied midterm elections, non-VCA counties had a slightly,

but not significantly, larger increase in voter turnout regardless of Asian American population size.

Figure 7

Relationship Of Asian American Population to Voter Turnout Changes (Presidential Elections)



When assessing presidential election turnout differences from 2016 to 2020, focusing on the average turnout differences in counties with Asian American populations greater than 15%, VCA counties had an average increase of 11.8 percentage points, and non-VCA counties had an average increase of 11.3 percentage points. Overall, in counties with larger Asian American populations, VCA counties had a slightly higher percentage increase than non-VCA counties by 0.5 percentage points. In terms of counties with a less than 15% Asian American population, VCA counties had an average increase of 10.5 percentage points, and non-VCA counties had an

average increase of 9.8 percentage points. All in all, in counties with Asian American populations less than 15%, VCA counties still had a slightly higher percentage increase than non-VCA counties by 0.7 percentage points. Ultimately, from the 2016 to 2020 presidential elections, VCA counties saw a marginally greater increase in Asian American voter turnout, regardless of population size.

Thus, from the data I analyzed, there is a perceived weak, but slightly positive relationship between Asian American population size and voter turnout, and there is little variation between VCA and non-VCA counties.

Analysis

The research I conducted revealed that, as of 2022 election data, there is no perceived significant relationship between Asian American voter turnout and VCA implementation when studied turnout over time with respect to VCA status. This rang true for both midterm and presidential elections. The differences in voter turnout amongst counties under the three categorizations of VCA implementation varied slightly at an average of about 0.5 percentage points and never exceeded 3 percentage points. This indicates that average voter turnout increase or decrease over time in each county was similar to one another, regardless of whether they had adopted the VCA. Therefore, there is no substantial evidence to support my hypothesis that VCA counties would have an overall higher Asian American turnout over time than non-VCA counties.

When comparing turnout in the 2014 election to turnout in the 2018 election, all counties experienced an increase in Asian American voter turnout. However, from the 2018 to 2022 midterm elections, both VCA counties and non-VCA counties experienced a decrease in Asian American voter turnout. This finding could be attributed to the fact that after 2020 and 2021,

many counties pulled back on their use of mail-in ballots, which could have impacted voter accessibility and desire to vote. However, because non-VCA counties only had an insignificantly greater decrease in voter turnout from 2018 to 2022 in comparison with VCA counties, it cannot be definitely concluded that mail-in ballot use or lack thereof had significant impacts on voter turnout.

In terms of Asian American voter turnout over time in the studied presidential elections (2016 and 2020), all counties experienced an average increase of about 11.2 percentage points, with little differences by VCA status. On average, VCA and non-VCA counties both experienced a notable rise in Asian American turnout at the 2020 presidential election, which is likely attributable to the widespread use of mail-in ballots in all counties during the pandemic.

The lack of significant differences over time between VCA and non-VCA counties could be attributed to various factors, including timeline of implementation. Since the VCA was only officially adopted in 2018 by 5 counties, 3 of which were included in my study, and implemented in the rest of the considered VCA counties starting in 2020. Still, as recently as 2022, it is challenging to comprehensively evaluate the policy's impacts at this time. Moreover, because of the unprecedented impacts of COVID-19 on voter behavior and society as a whole, it is difficult to discern whether or not the data would reveal the same relationship between the VCA and Asian American voter turnout in different circumstances.

In terms of Asian American population size and voter turnout, the data revealed that there is a weak but slightly positive relationship between larger Asian American populations and elevated voter turnout by county. There was also no clear relationship between VCA and non-VCA status and population size per county. In midterm elections, non-VCA counties had an average higher turnout increase, and in presidential elections, VCA counties had an average

higher turnout increase. Yet, these differences did not vary in highly populated versus less populated counties. Therefore, my research cannot fully support my hypothesis that the voter turnout of Asian Americans would be greater in counties with larger Asian American populations and VCA implementation.

This finding implies that a large Asian American population size per county does not necessarily have an upward impact on the population's voter turnout. When I predicted a positive relationship between population size and turnout, my main underlying assumption was that large Asian American populations in counties could translate into greater political representation. I assumed that diversity could impact Asian Americans' engagement and interest in voting, specifically for local representatives. However, this research does not support that assumption, as factors limiting Asian American voter turnout are present in both counties with high and low Asian American population sizes.

Although my findings did not support both of my hypotheses, my research sheds light on the relationship between voter reform and voter turnout in minority populations. Moreover, in assessing my findings, I discovered various different avenues of research that could amplify these findings and further delve into mobilizing Asian American voter turnout.

Implications and Future Suggestions

A key takeaway from this study is that while voter reform initiatives typically enhance overall voter turnout, evaluating their specific effects on minority populations is challenging. To effectively tackle the voter participation gap affecting the Asian American community, it is important to foster direct dialogue with AAPI individuals. Whether through methods such as public opinion surveys, interviews, or focus groups, a productive approach to shaping voter reform policy would be to evaluate the main obstacles eligible Asian American voters face in

exercising their voting rights. Gauging these needs can provide valuable insight to legislators, especially those representing majority Asian American districts and counties, about what types of bills or reforms to advocate for to increase voter turnout.

Additionally, future research on this topic should attempt to be more inclusive of AAPI ethnic subgroups to better capture the differing voter experiences across the population. The term AAPI often serves as an overarching classification for a diverse ethnic group, yet it can overlook the distinct experiences encountered by East Asians, South Asians, Southeast Asians, and Pacific Islanders. Future research could yield more effective results by focusing on voter outcomes among specific ethnic subgroups within the Asian American community, particularly those facing higher barriers to voting for reasons like overall lower English proficiency rate or average lower incomes. For instance, as of 2018, 73% of Bhutanese people and 72% of Burmese people have limited English proficiency (LEP), whereas 20% of Indian people and 16% of Japanese people are LEP (Uprety, 2018). Thus, it would be more revealing to discover relationships between the voter turnout of higher LEP populations and voter reform implementation. It would also be intriguing to expand this research to study the relationship between the presence of language access facilities in counties and Asian American voter turnout. In order for these relationships to be analyzed most effectively, however, there needs to be greater access to specific disaggregated voter data by ethnic subgroup, county, and election year.

In conclusion, although my research revealed a weak relationship between VCA implementation and Asian American voter turnout, it shed light on the work to be done in researching the Asian American voter participation gap. It is important that policymakers at the state-level consider the specified needs of the AAPI community and minorities generally to have a substantial impact on their voter trends. Increasing the involvement of the rapidly expanding

voter-eligible population of Asian Americans in the voting process could significantly boost overall voter turnout.

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