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Voting and Registration in California: Early Voting

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Publication Date

2015-02-18

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VOTING AND REGISTRATION IN CALIFORNIA

EARLY VOTING

Research to Support the Future of California Elections

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FEBRUARY 2015



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Key Findings

- Whites are the most likely group to vote early, across all regions.
- Latinos are the least likely California voters to vote early. Given how we are defining “early voters” in this report, this is likely do to their low rates of voting by mail. But it does raise concern about the effectiveness of early voting to engage all of California’s electorate, absent a strong voter education campaign targeted at Latino eligible voters.
- African American and Asian American early voting rates vary significantly across the state.
- Patterns of early voting vary by geography and, in important ways, among ethnoracial voters within geographies. For every ethnoracial group in every region, we found unexpected “hotspots.” Future research should explore how to explain this variation across geographies and populations.
- Budgetary considerations are critical when registrars are deciding whether to implement early voting in their jurisdictions.
- Voter awareness about early voting opportunities seems limited across the state.

Introduction

California is one of 33 states plus the District of Columbia in which any qualified voter can cast a ballot in person during a specified period before Election Day, without having to provide an excuse or justification. One way California does this is by authorizing no-excuse absentee voting. In addition, beyond the statutory authorization for no-excuse absentee voting, each county is free to determine additional methods for early voting. Yet, we know little about how much this opportunity is used, by whom, and how it varies across counties.

We learned that it is very difficult to track early voters in California because all the counties we contacted fold the information they record about early voters (individuals who vote at mobile poll sites or in person at the registrar’s office) in with that of voters who vote by mail. As a proxy, we use the “always early” and “usually early” flags from Political Data, Inc. as a way of defining “early voters.”¹ These flags include voters who voted early in person as well as voters who turn in their mail ballots early always or most of the time. Although this does not precisely capture early voters, it does at least provide information about those California

voters who tend to complete the voting process before Election Day, either in person or by mail. Examining the characteristics of these voters provides insight into those sectors of the electorate who could be expected to take advantage of early voting opportunities should they be expanded across California.

Based on these parameters, there are 1,986,642 currently registered Californians who always or usually vote early. Just over 75 percent of these early voters are white, 13 percent are Latino, 8.9 percent are Asian American, and 2.9 percent are African American.² Thus, voters of color seem less likely to vote early than white voters.

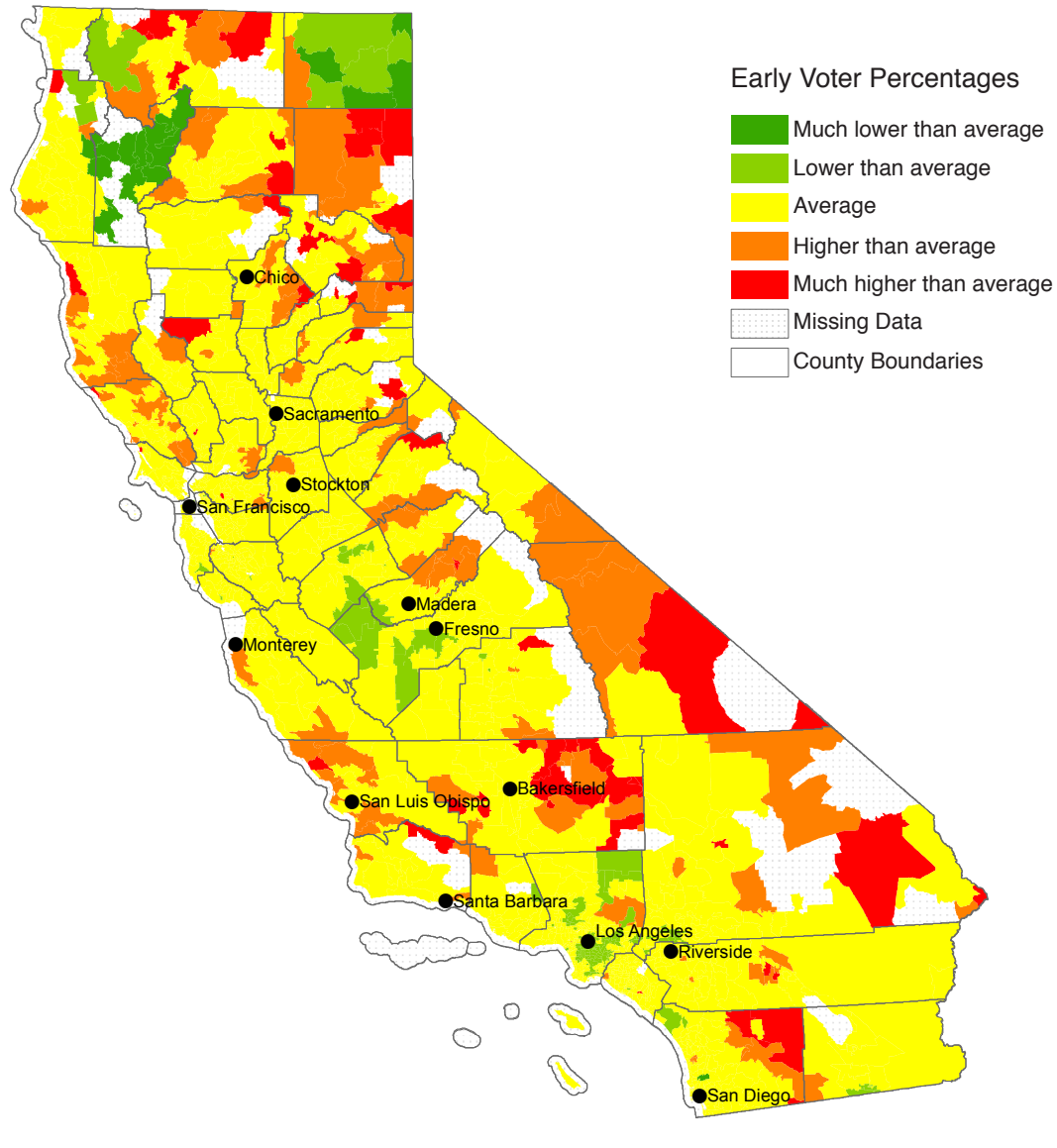
Early Voting Varies across Counties and across Ethnoracial Groups within Counties

One of the questions we wanted to explore was the geographic distribution of early voters across the state and within counties. To do this, we mapped early voters into their respective zip codes. We then compared the number of early voters within each zip code to the statewide average of early voters. The first statewide map shows the result of this analysis. The red and orange areas show the zip codes where the number of early voters was significantly greater than the statewide average; the green shows those zip codes where the rates were below average. Yellow denotes zip codes that fall within the statewide average. In this map we see that the northern and southeastern parts of the state seem to have the largest numbers of early voters. This is likely due to the relatively long distances voters in these areas need to travel in order to reach their polling places. Given the geographic spread in these areas, it is logical that these voters would take advantage of opportunities to vote by mail.

Beyond the tendency to vote early overall within a county, we were interested in considering how early voting propensities vary across ethnoracial groups within counties. The next set of maps looks at early voting propensities among Latino, Asian American, and African American early voters in comparison to whites within that county. As with the statewide map, zip codes coded red or orange are those where the proportion of early voters was significantly greater than the statewide average; the green shows those zip codes where the rates were below average. Yellow denotes zip codes that fall within the statewide average. For ease of understanding, we have divided the state into five regions: northern, which includes the northernmost counties; bay area, including the San Francisco bay area; East Central, which includes the eastern central part of the state; Central Valley, which includes the San Joaquín Valley; and Southern, which includes the southern and easternmost part of the state.

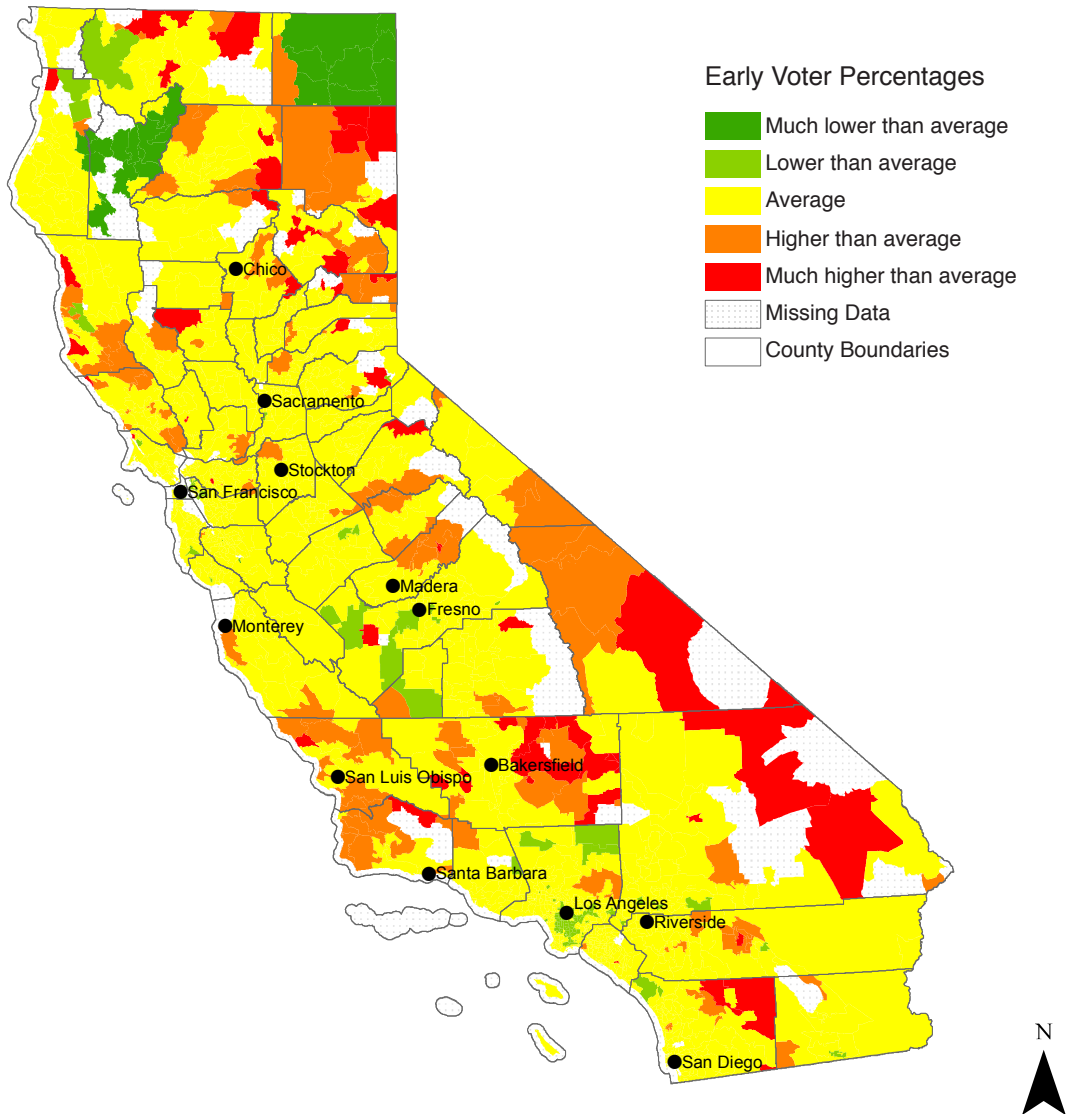
Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code, Within all California Counties

Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code, Within all California Counties



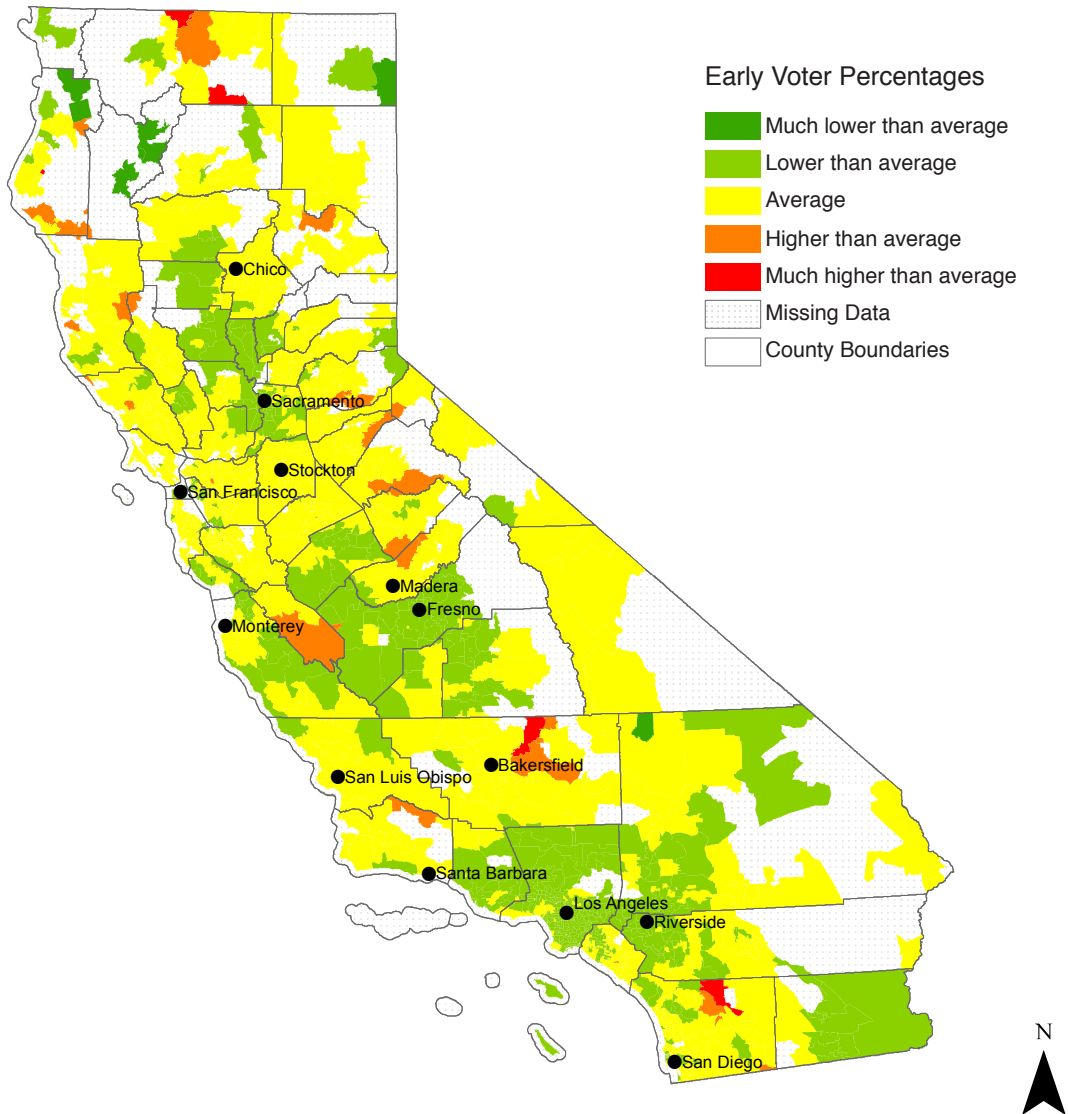
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Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code, Whites



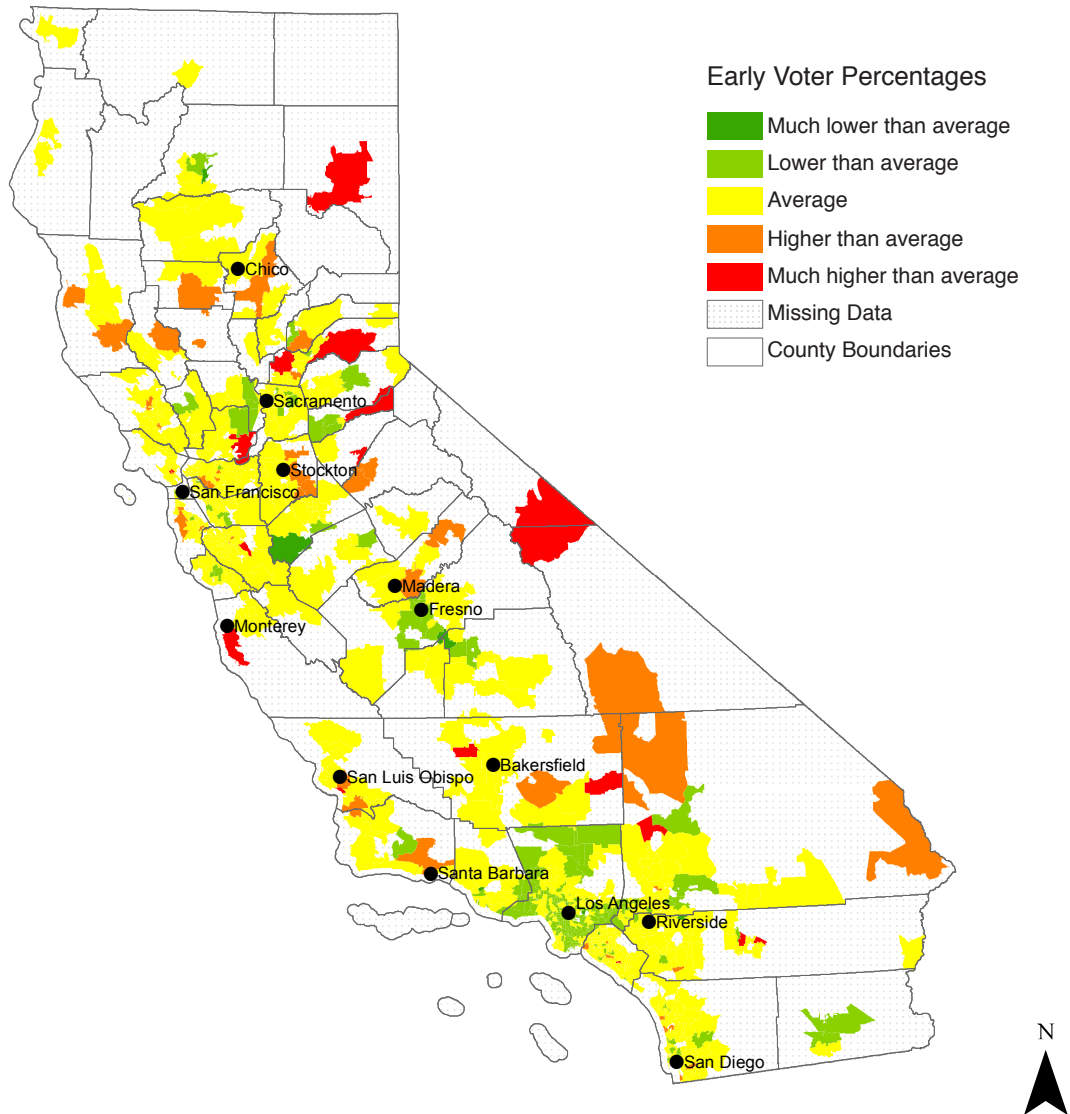
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Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code, Latinos Relative to Whites



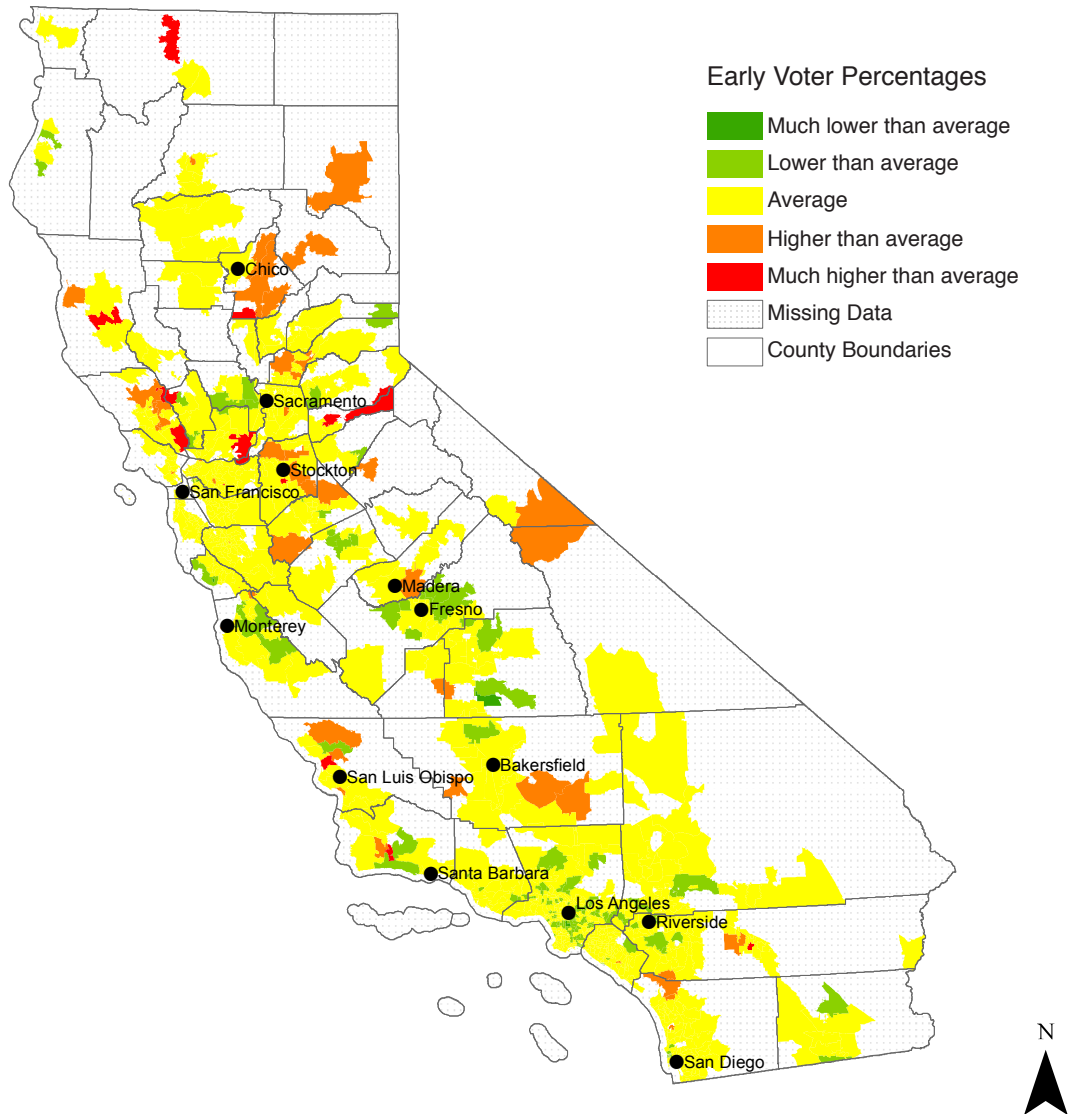
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Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code, African Americans Relative to Whites



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Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code, Asians Relative to Whites



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Early Voting from an Institutional Perspective: An In-Depth Look at Orange and Riverside Counties

While it would have been ideal to undertake a statewide survey of each county's practice regarding early voting, this was beyond the scope of this project. Yet by interviewing and reviewing information from the two counties that have the most robust early voting systems, Orange and Riverside, as to how they interpret and implement no-excuse absentee voting and early voting, we can gain important insights into the key questions surrounding the implementation of early voting from the point of view of the offices that run California's elections.

Orange and Riverside counties offered early voting in the November 2012 election. Each offered a different type of early voting. Riverside provided the option of voting by mail and Orange utilized its electronic voting system in eleven locations in the county as well as vote by mail. In order to better understand their experiences with early voting, in May 2014 we interviewed key personnel in Orange and Riverside counties and reviewed relevant publicly available information regarding voting in the respective counties.

A number of key themes emerged from the interviews:

- Each county determines for itself whether to provide in-person "polling place" early voting and/or the acceptance of absentee ballots in specified locations prior to Election Day.
- The prime motivation for counties to organize early voting, whether in-person "polling place" or absentee ballots, is to reduce congestion and waiting times on Election Day.
- Budget limitations mostly relating to staff availability and costs seem to be the most critical determinant of number of days and locations offered for early voting.
- Efforts to inform the public about early voting opportunities are mostly limited to information provided in the sample ballots sent to every registered voter prior to each election. Counties make an effort to provide additional information on their official websites, rely on word of mouth through organizations such as League of Women Voters and other non-profit groups, and physical signs at specified locations regarding the dates on which early voting takes place.
- While there has been a steady increase in vote by mail and use of absentee ballots, there does not appear to be as of yet significant awareness or utilization of early voting (other than ballots being mailed in before Election Day).

Policy Recommendations

The variation across counties in terms of how they define early voting seems to create confusion among voters. In order for early voting to have as broad an impact as possible on expanding the California electorate, at a minimum it should be defined and implemented consistently across the state. For that to happen, there are some practical issues that would need to be considered:

- The limited number of electronic voting systems that are certified by the Secretary of State creates a technological constraint that limits counties' ability to provide "polling place" and/or mobile early voting opportunities.
- Geography and population density are relevant to the feasibility of setting up early voting sites (whether "polling place" or for receipt of absentee ballots). Therefore, less densely populated counties may not find establishing in-person early voting locations to be financially feasible. Given the concentration of white early (largely mail) voters in those areas, however, those counties perhaps should focus on public education campaigns that encourage ethnoracial voters to vote by mail as well.
- Public awareness of early voting appears limited; early voting would only be effective as an electoral reform if there were a concerted effort on the part of county registrars and the Secretary of State to increase that awareness. Such campaigns would need to be sensitive to the geographic and ethnoracial differences in early voting rates we find here.

Conclusion

California continues to lag in voter participation as compared to other states in the country. By extending the time period open for voting, early voting has the potential to lower the costs of voting, which could serve to improve voting rates among Californians. But our analysis of ethnoracial and geographic differences in early voting rates should insert a note of caution here. Without a coordinated voter education campaign targeting eligible voters within particular ethnoracial communities, it is unlikely that all of California's voters will take advantage of the early voting opportunities provided to them by their county registrars. We hope this analysis will help local registrars identify the ethnoracial communities and zip codes where they can best focus their outreach and education efforts.

ENDNOTES

Our thanks to Christina Chong for providing the graphic design for this policy brief. Loan Le provided research support and Kimmie Puccetti produced all the maps included here. Thanks also to Orange County Registrar of Voters Neal Kelley and Orange County staff member Michael Scarpello, Riverside County Registrar of Voters Chief Deputy Melissa Eichman and Riverside County staff person Larry Smith for participating in these interviews and contributing to our report. Catherine Hazelton and Doug Chapin provided helpful feedback on previous iterations of this report. This research received generous support from The James Irvine Foundation, the Tides Foundation, and the Progressive Era Project. Our funders are not responsible for this report's content.

¹ This analysis is based on data provided by Political Data, Inc. (PDI), a data vendor that collects data from each of the 58 counties in California and other proprietary sources. PDI acquires voter data from individual counties at regular intervals, typically no less often than once per 4 months. When voter records are retrieved from counties, they are subjected to record standardization, validation, and enhancement. Standardization includes the application of an internal matching reference key, an internal ID tracking number, and name field standardization. Validations against death registries and National Change of Address listings are also performed. For the identification of voters who filed for registration online, PDI relies largely on the record keeping of the individual counties. In most cases, the voting method and timing are recorded and maintained by the county registrar-recorder and can be added directly to voter file records. Because this analysis includes the entire universe of voters, there is no need to consider sampling, margins of error, etc. All the numbers reported here are for registered voters in this statewide database.

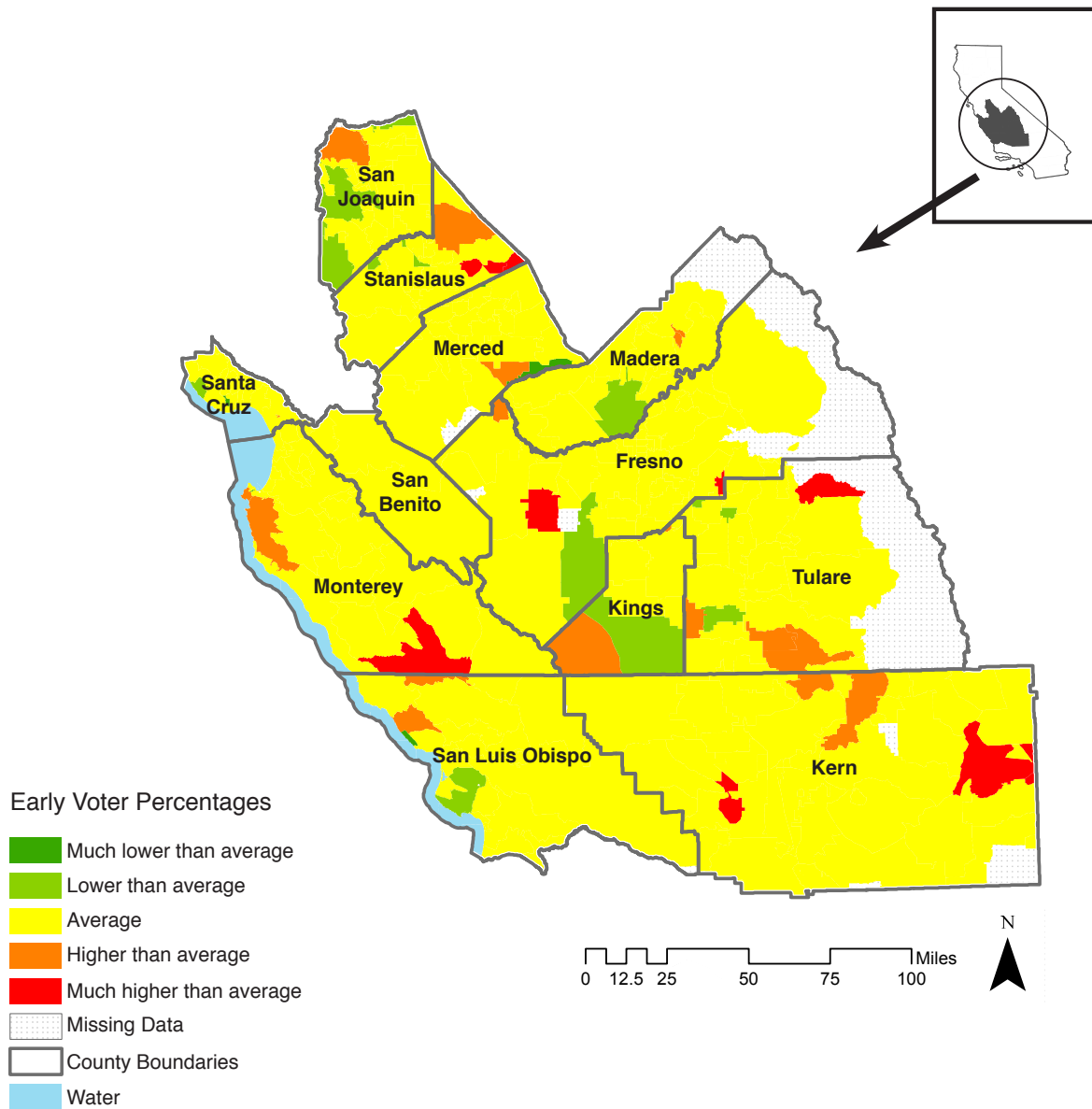
² We should note that the African American flags in this data set are not completely reliable. Thus this information should be interpreted with caution.

Central California Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code

Voting and Registration in California: APPENDIX

(Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code by Region)

Central California Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip, Whites

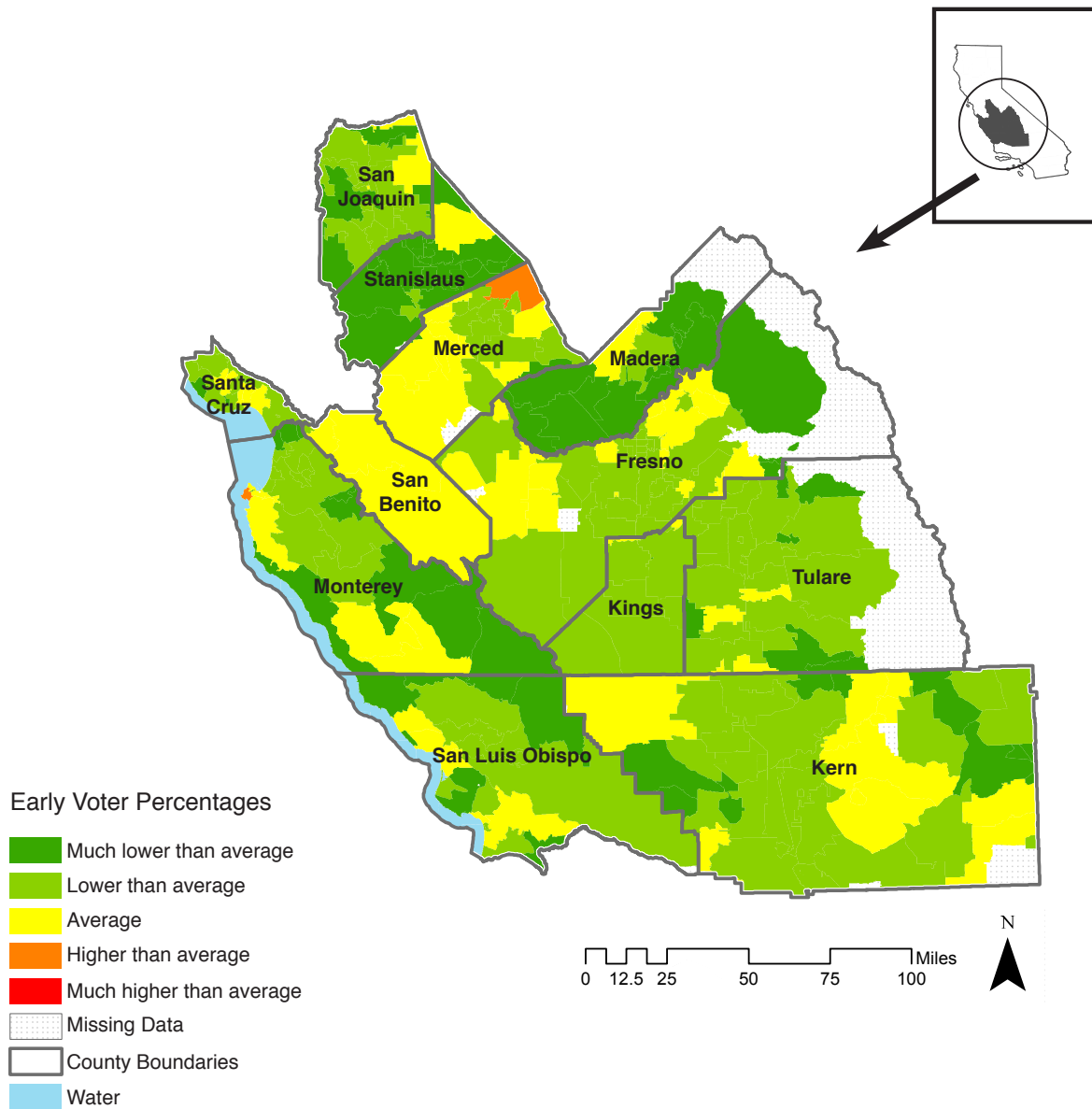


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Central California Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip, Latinos Relative to Whites

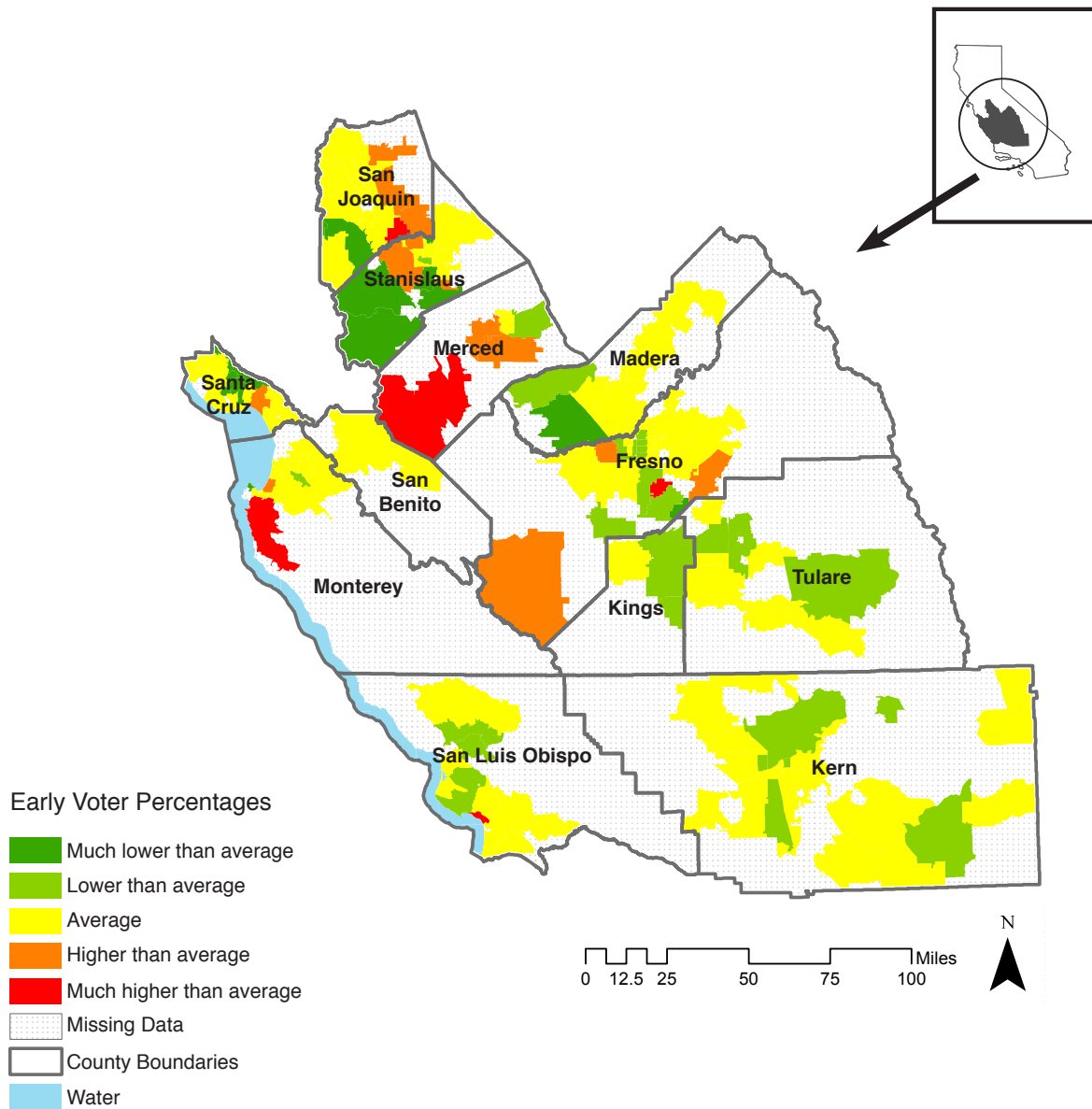


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Central California Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip, African Americans Relative to Whites

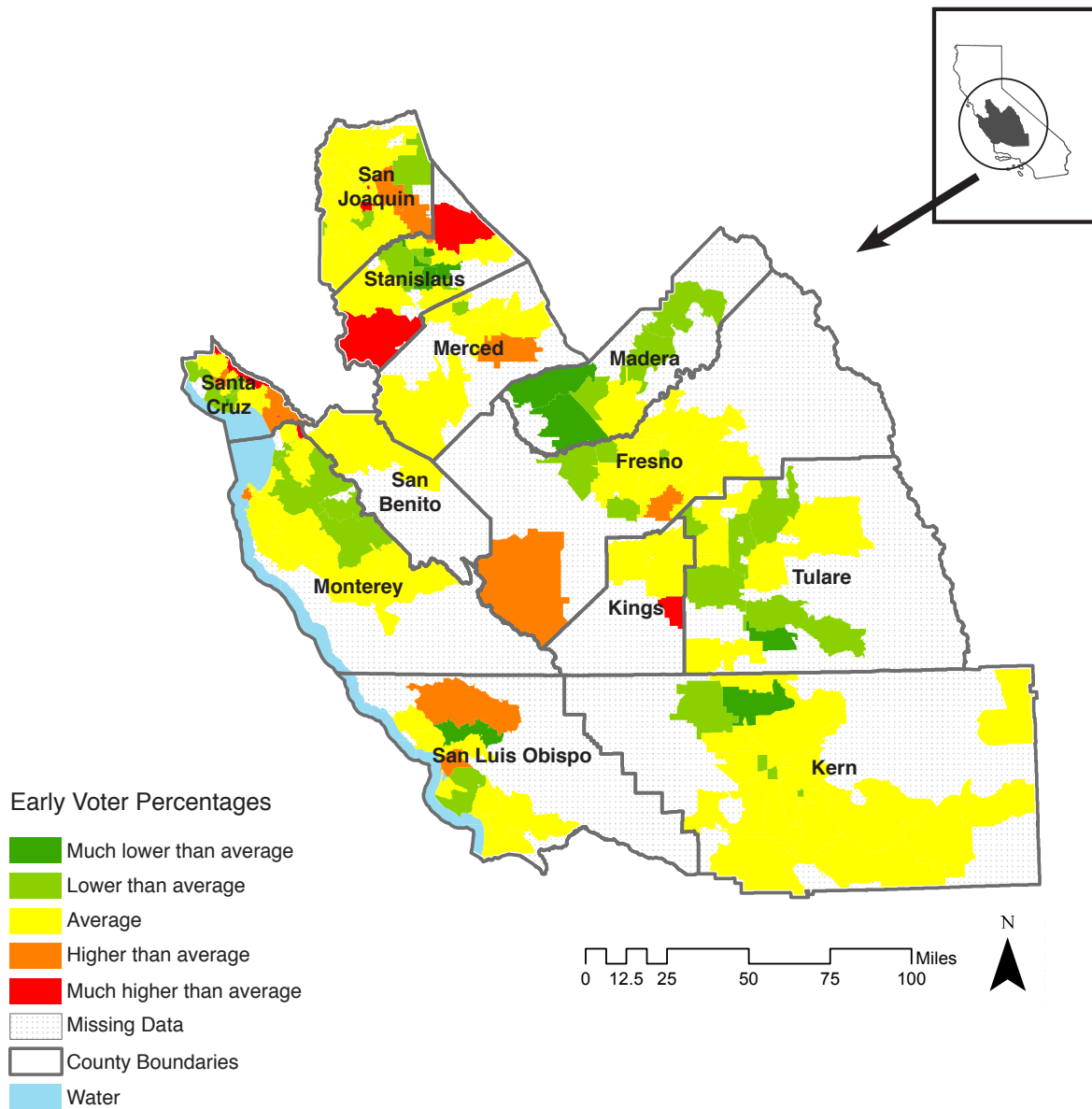


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Central California Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip, Asians Relative to Whites



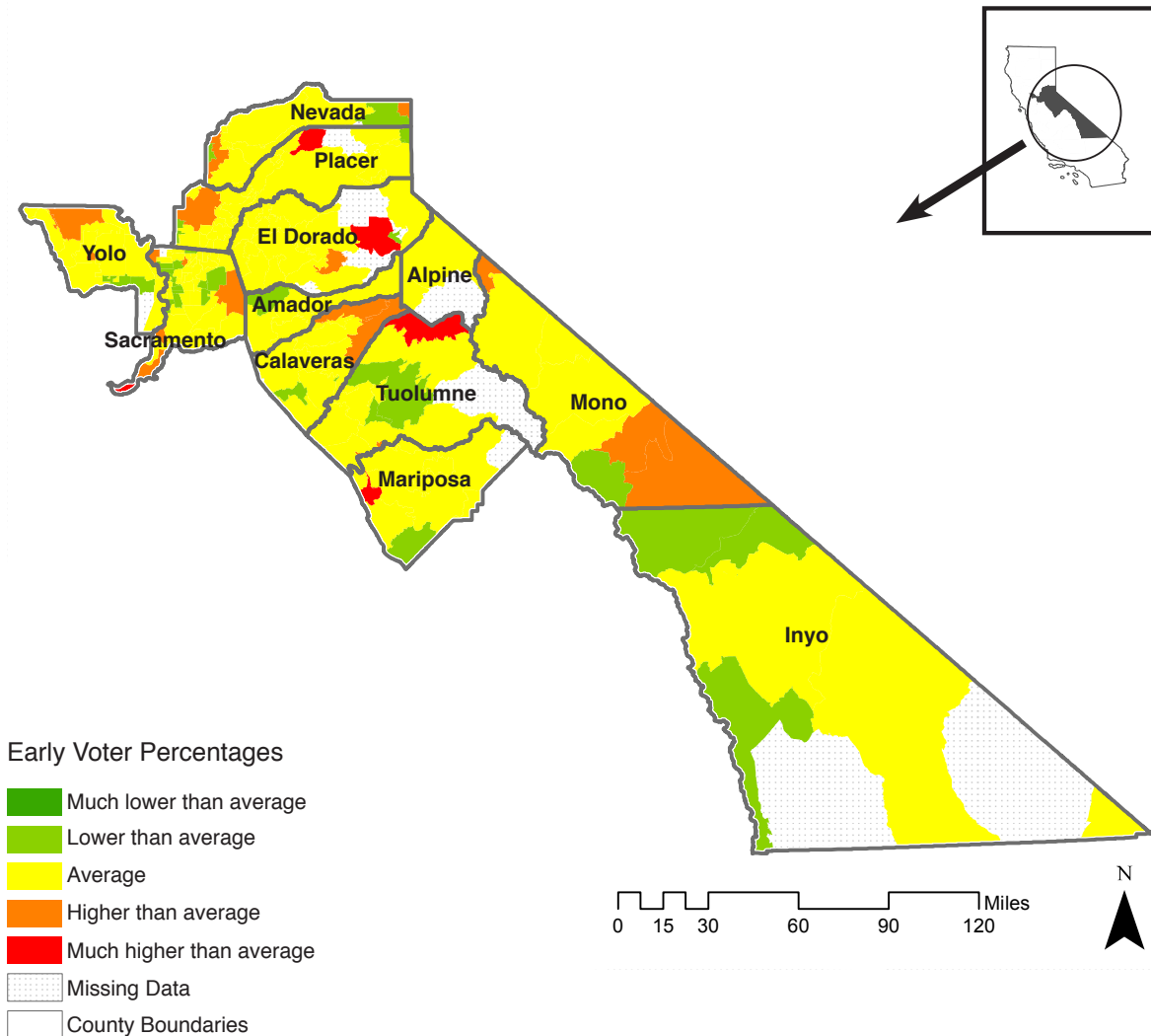
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East Central California Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code

Voting and Registration in California: APPENDIX

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East Central California Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip, Whites

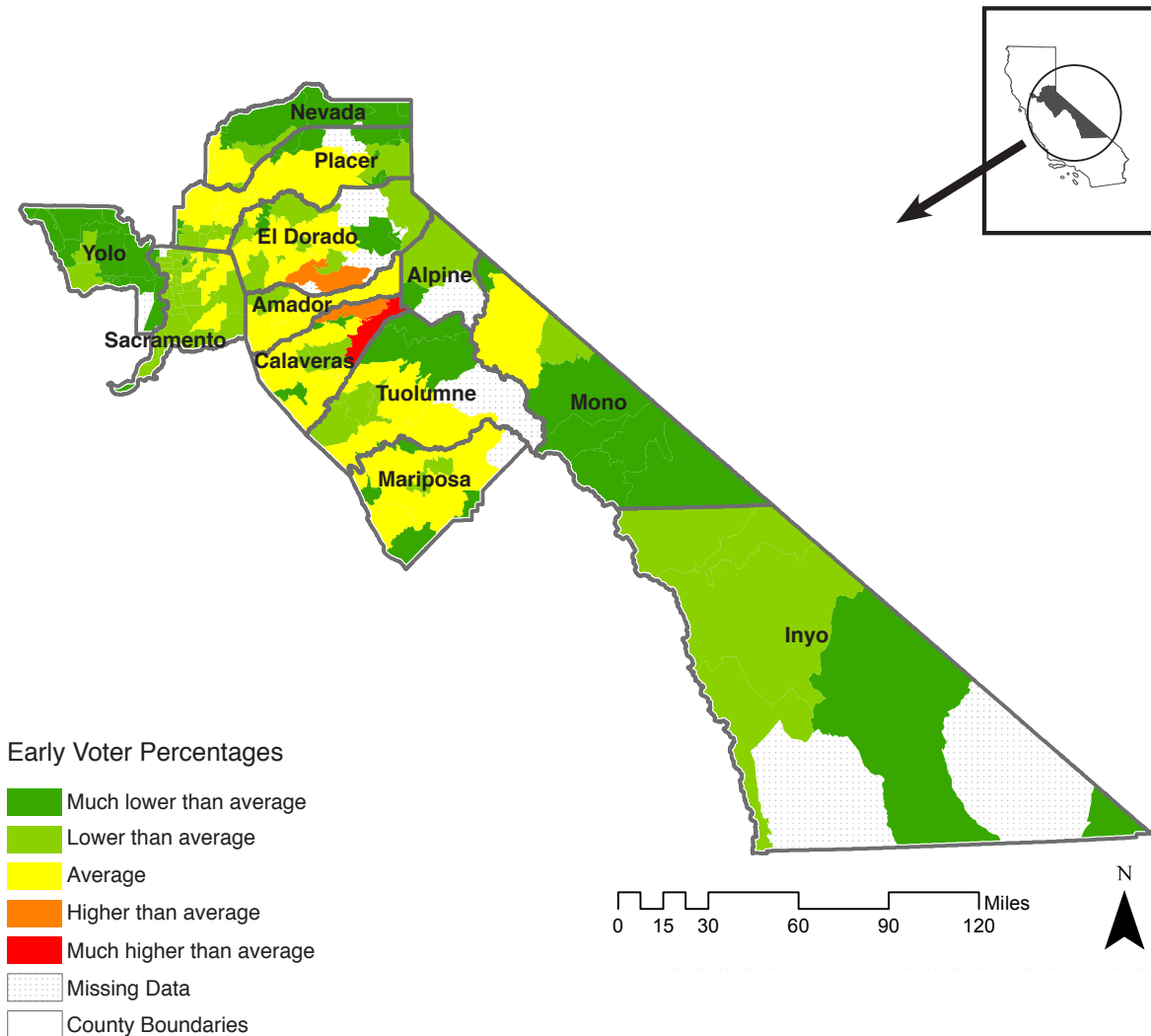


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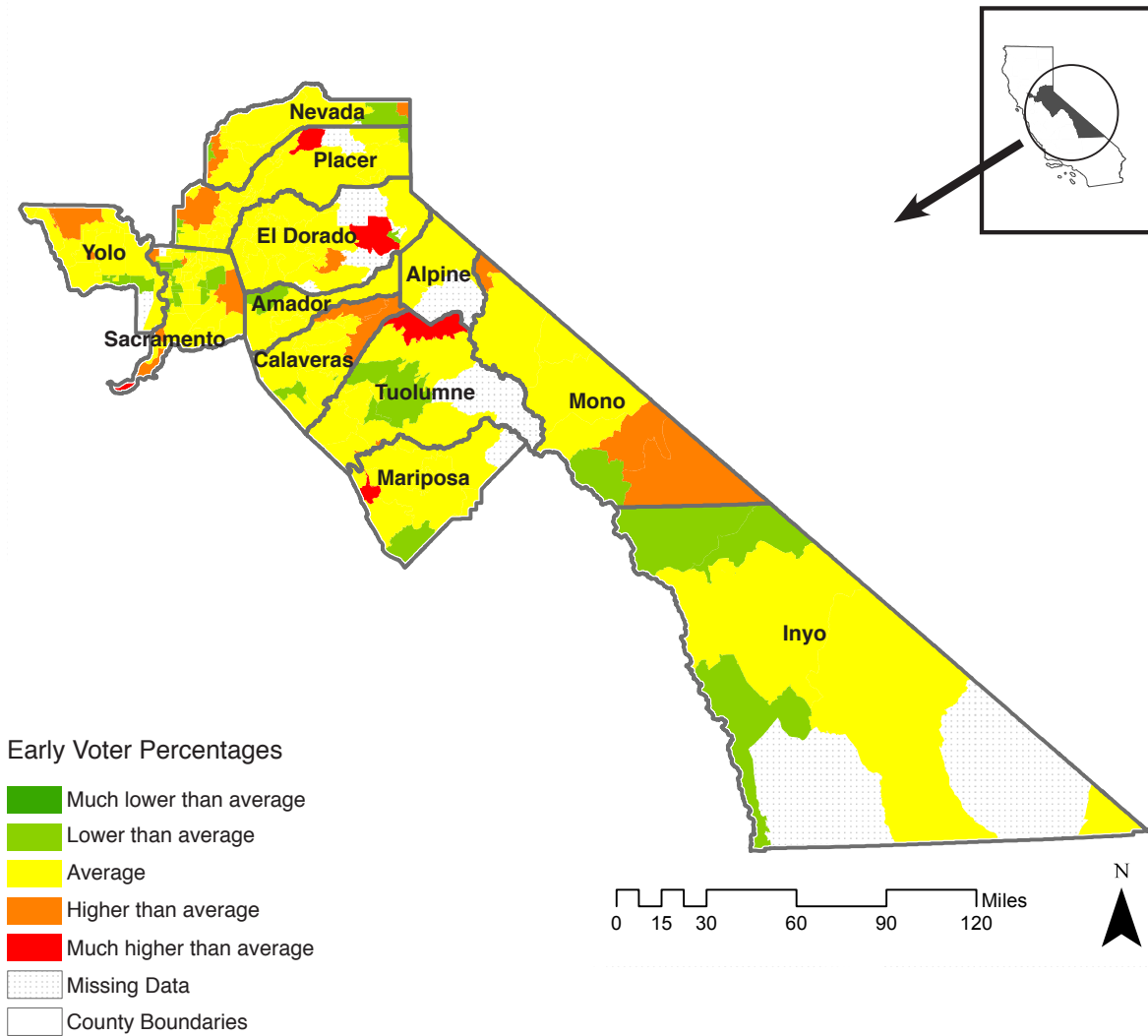


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East Central California Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip, African Americans Relative to Whites

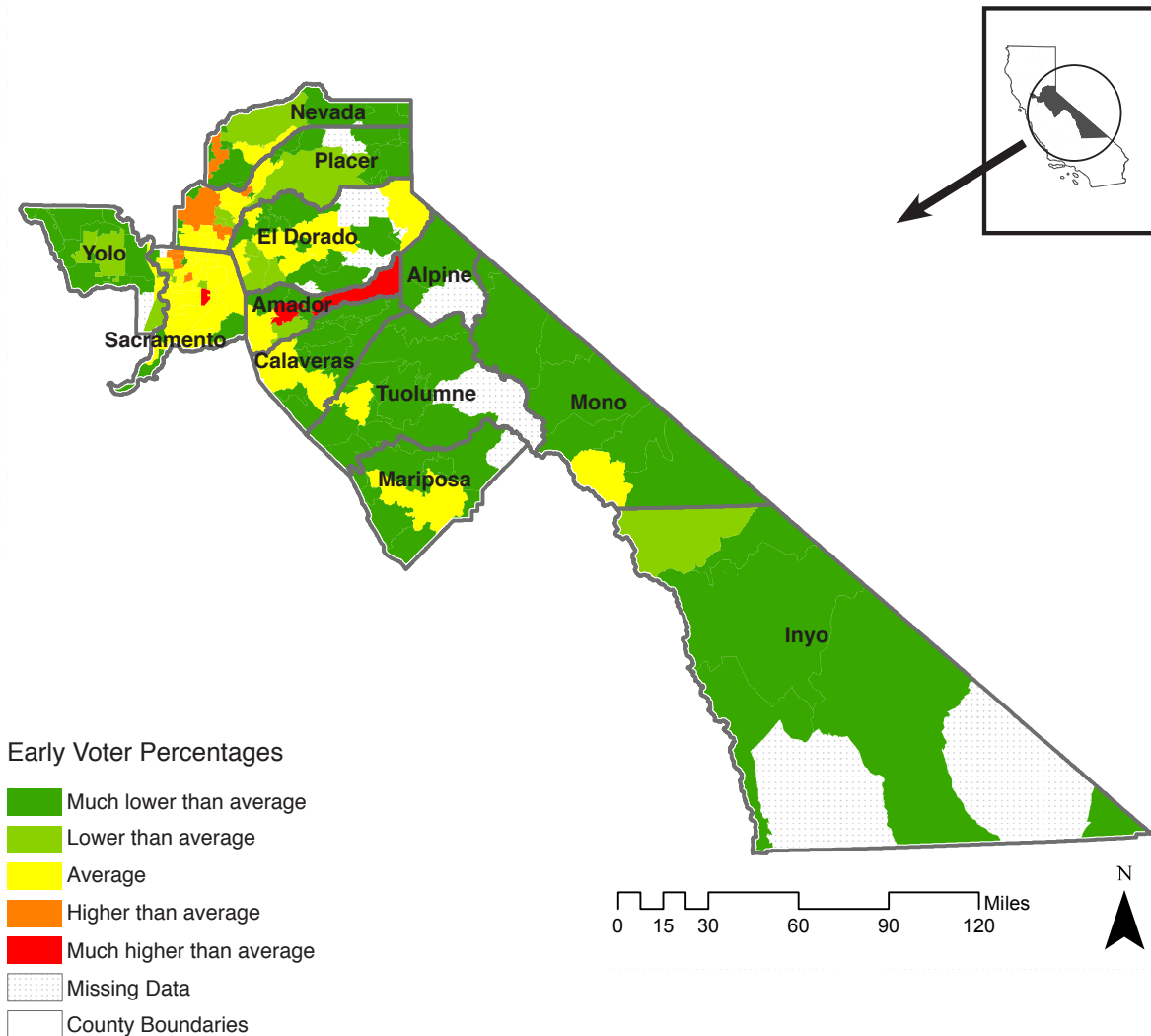


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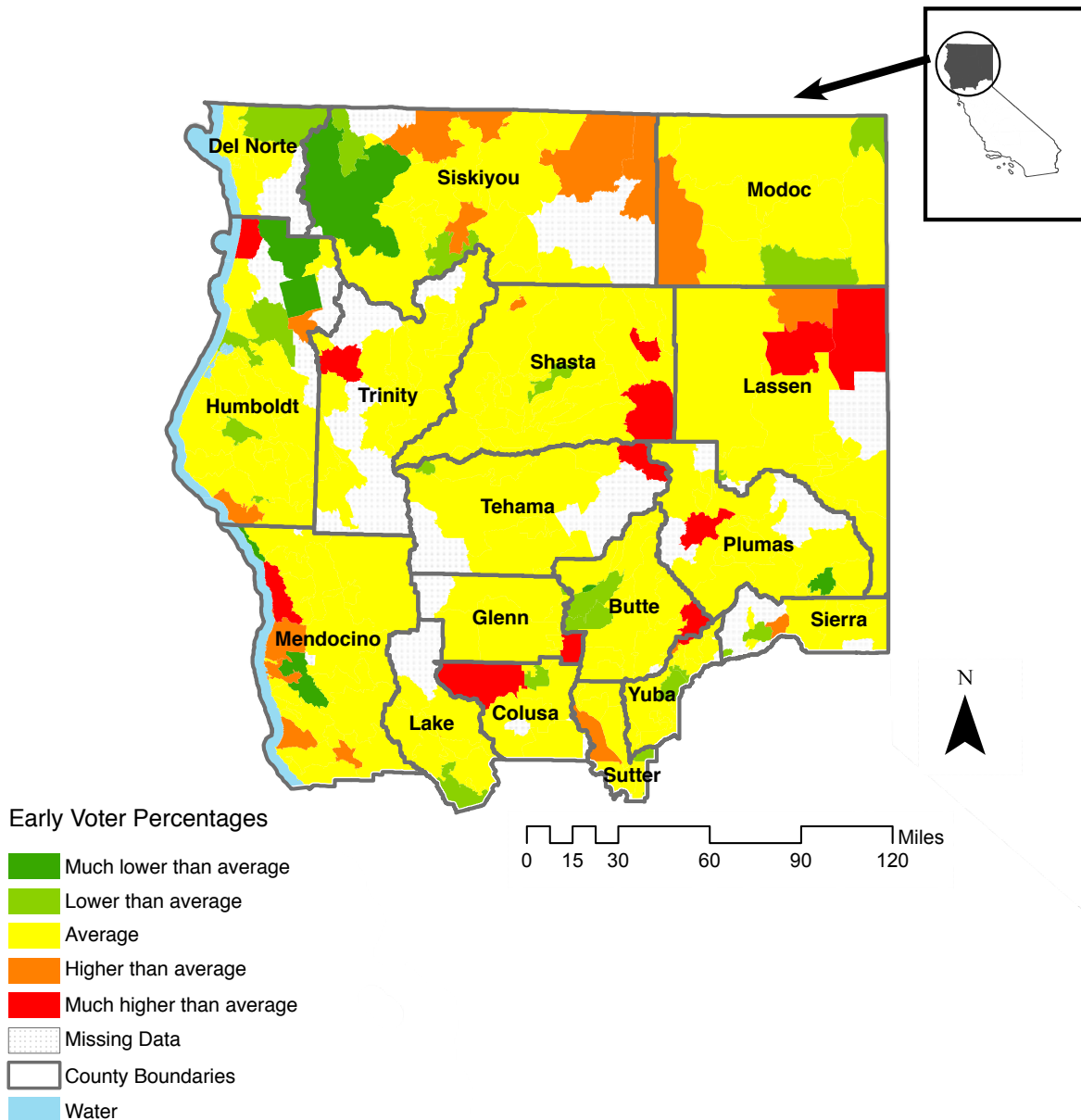
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Northern California Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code

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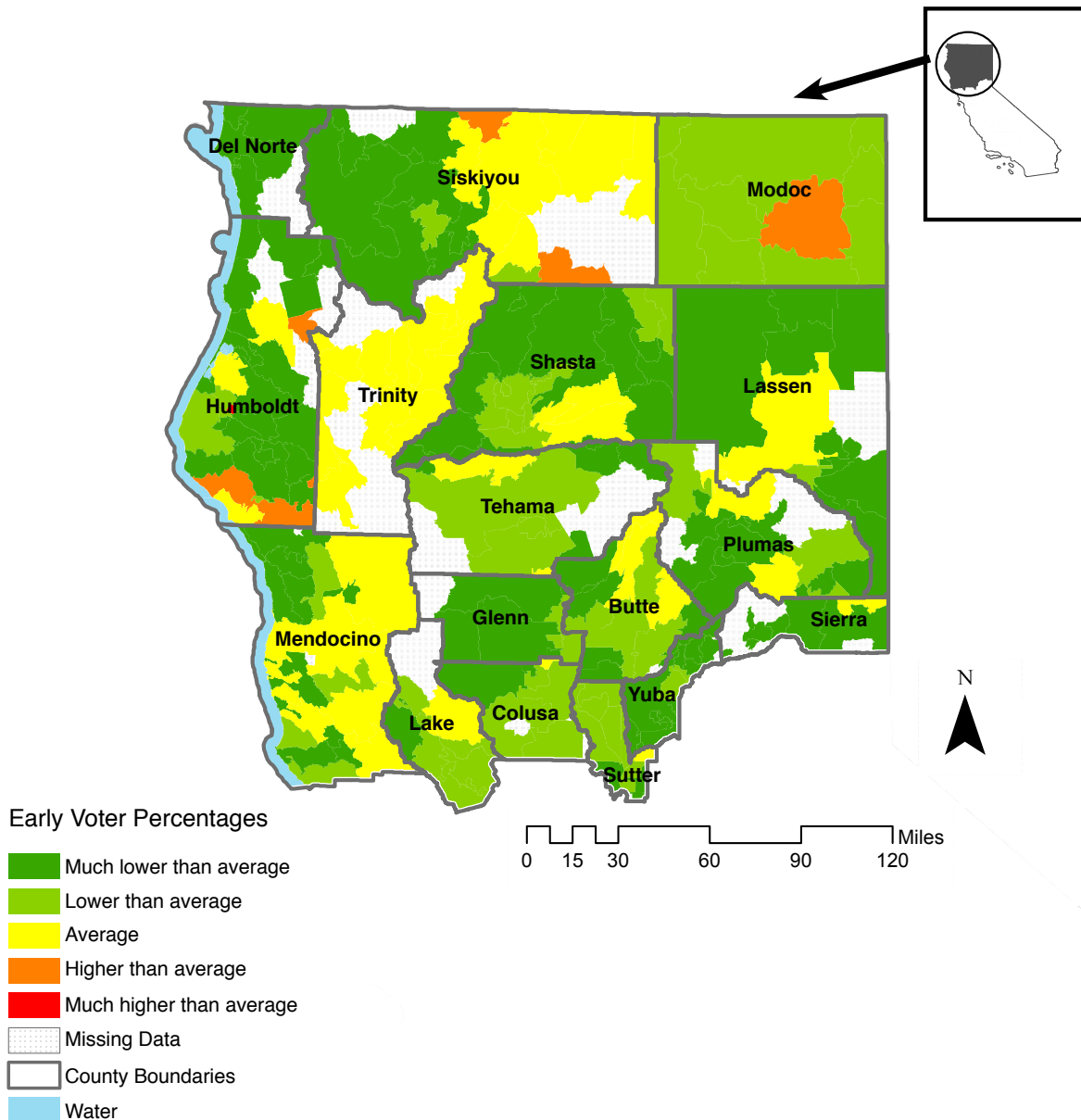


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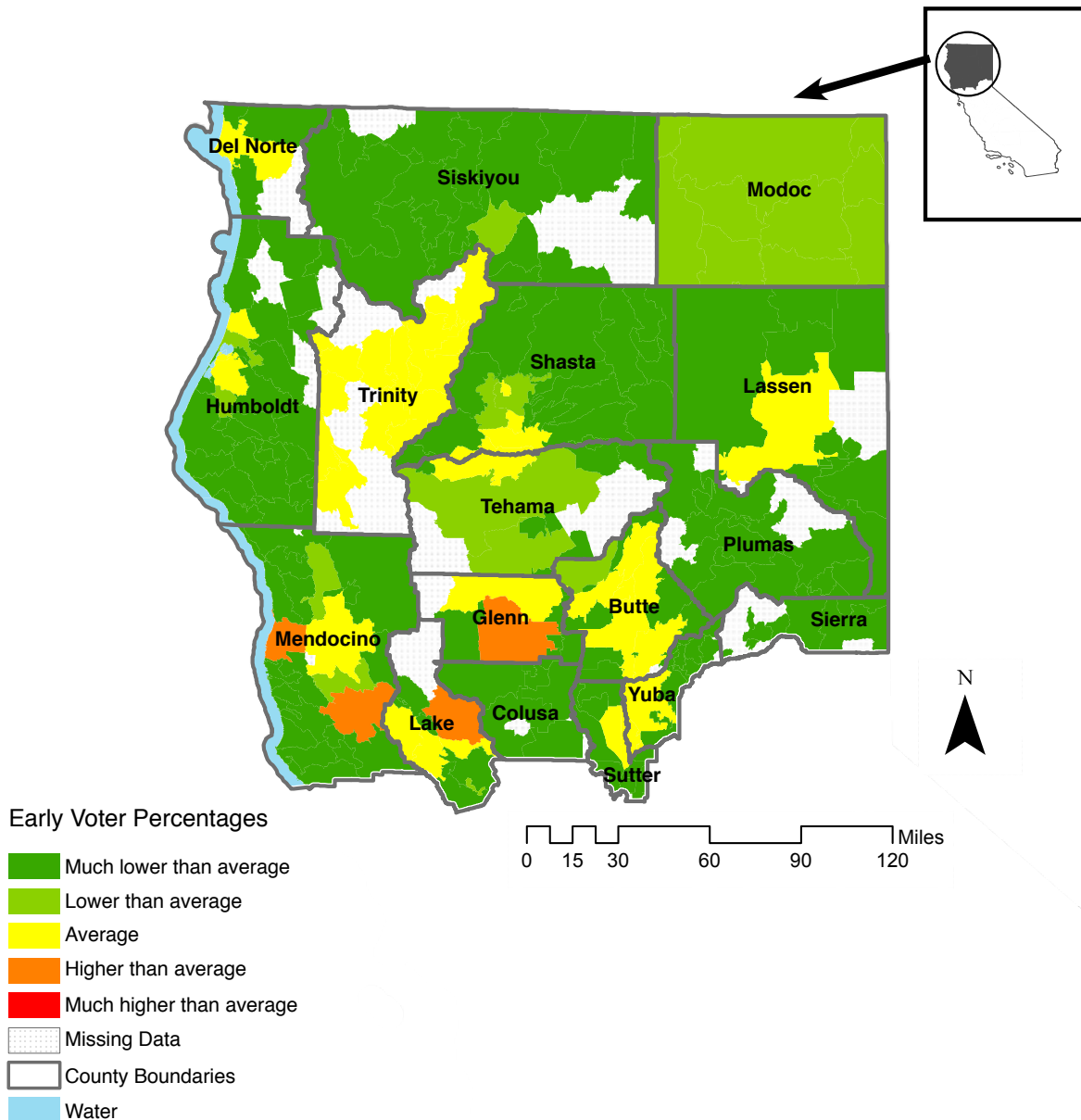


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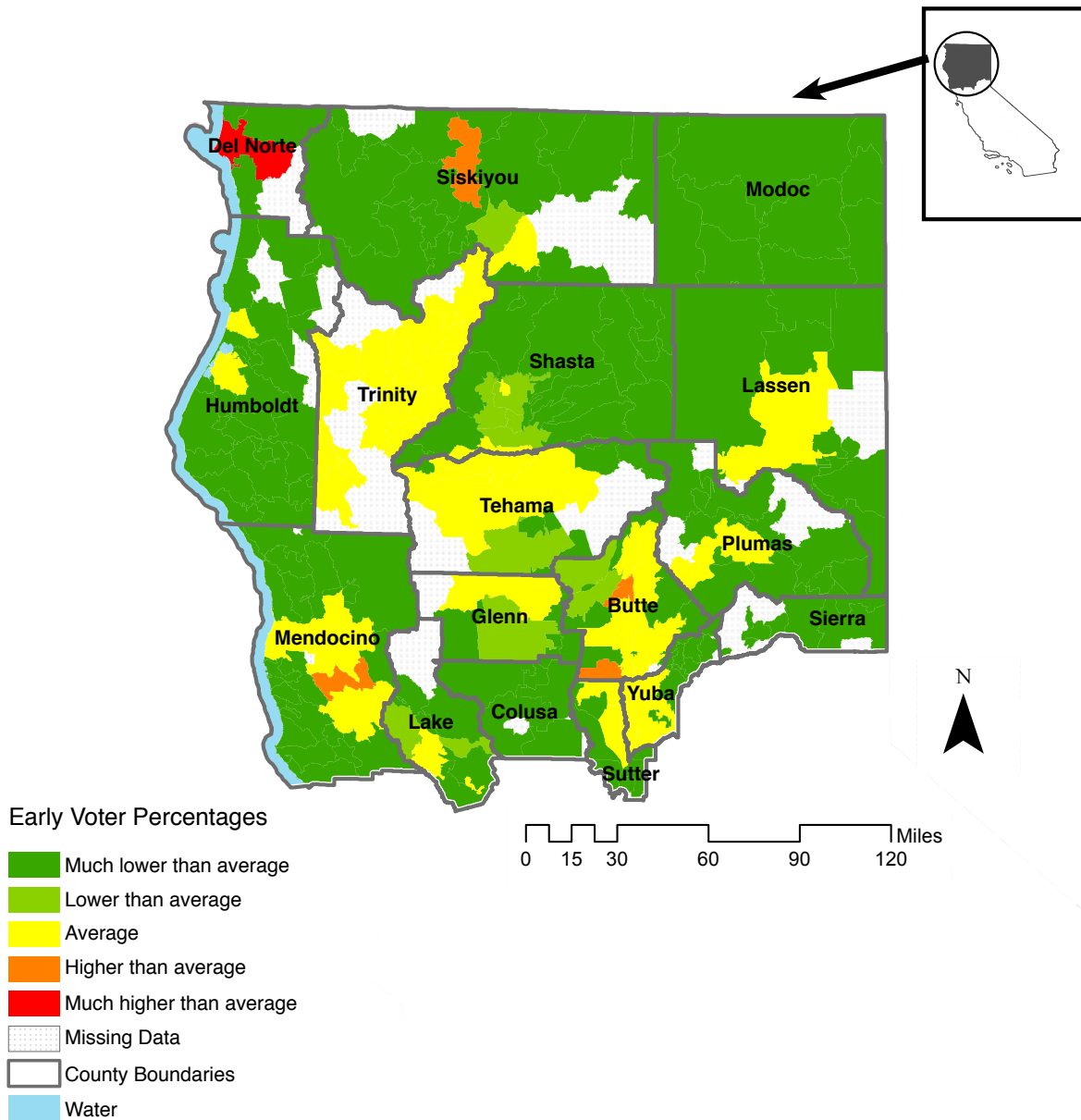


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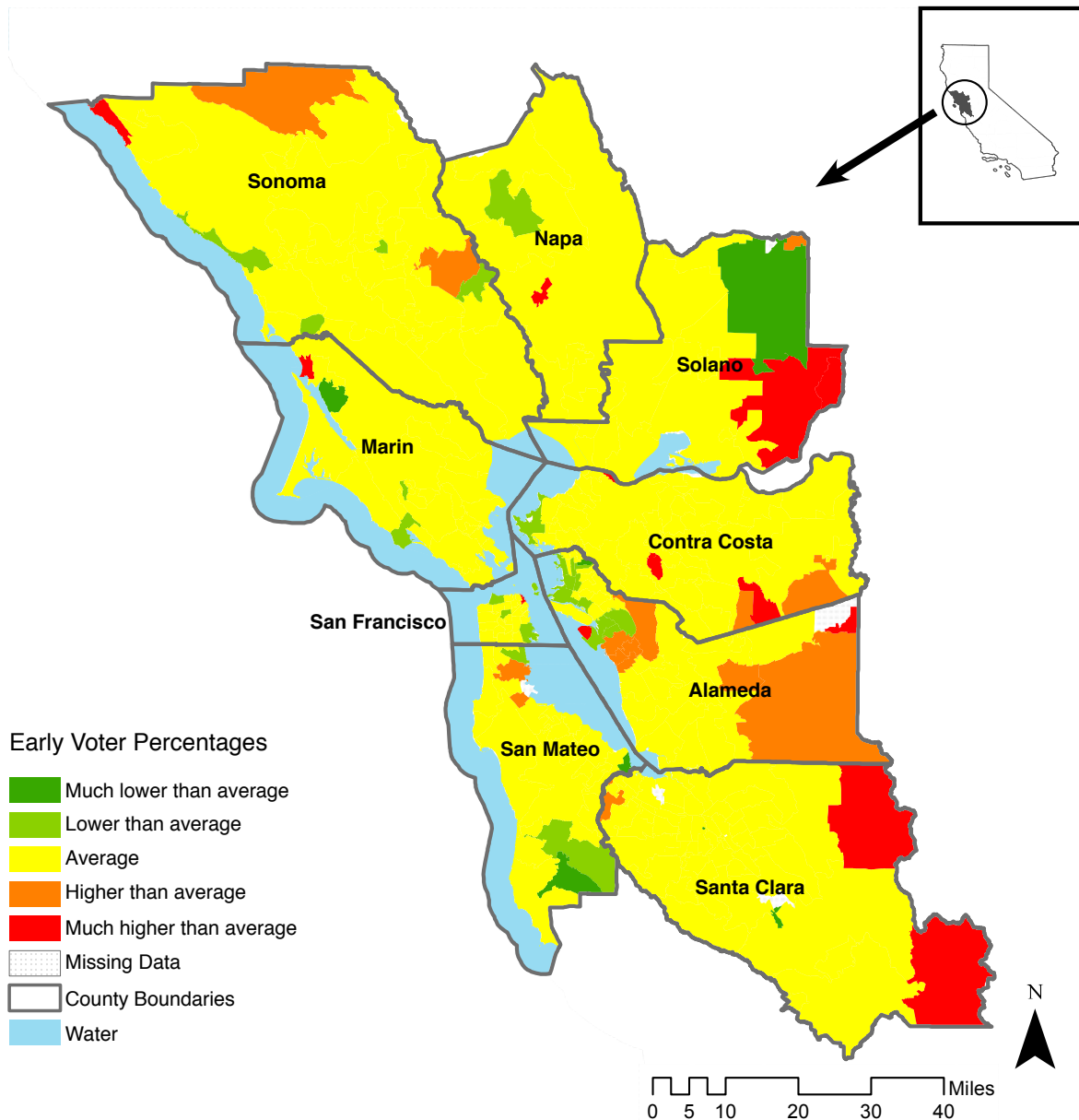
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San Francisco Bay Area Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code

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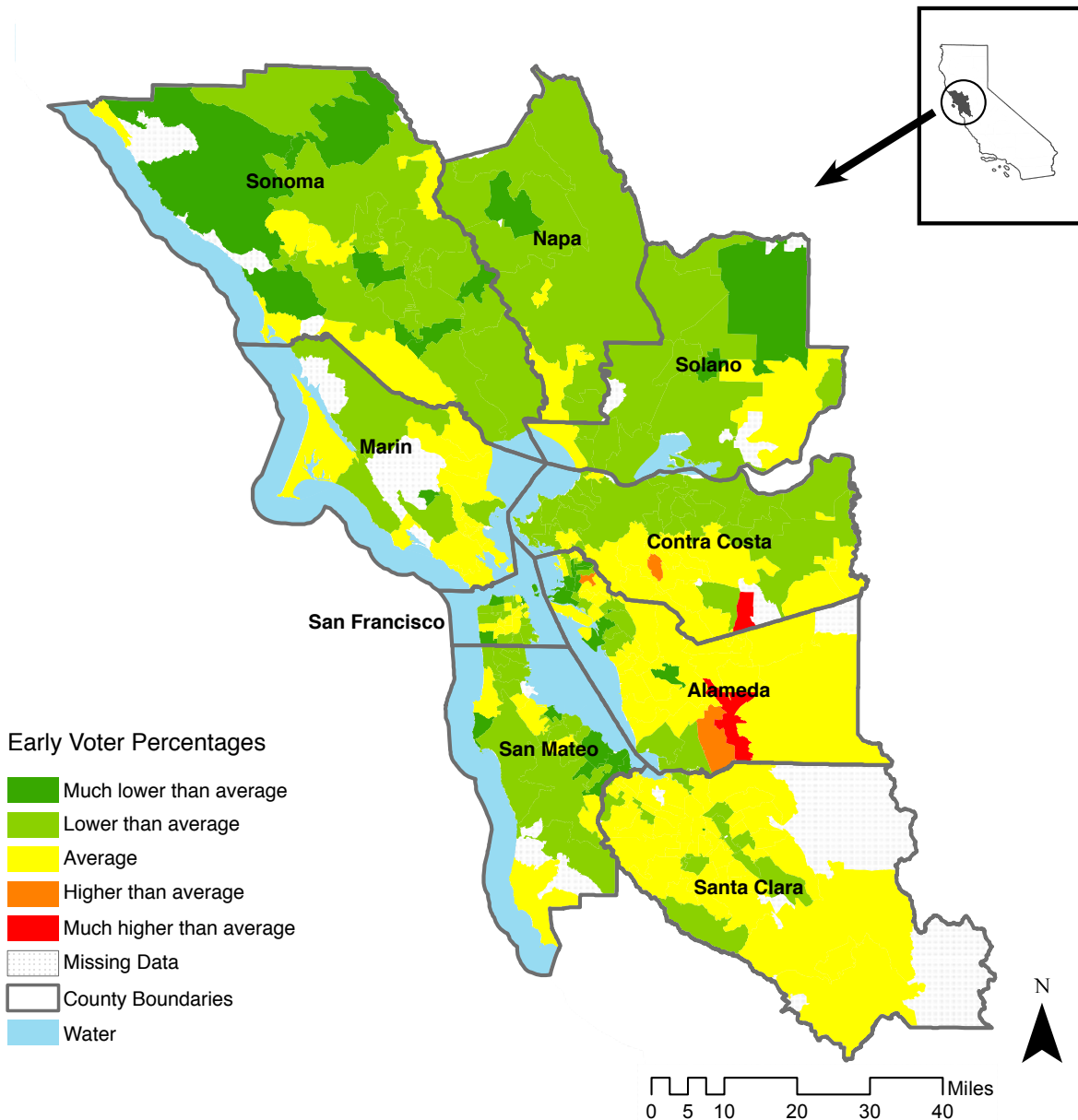


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(Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code by Region)

San Francisco Bay Area Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip, Latinos Relative to Whites

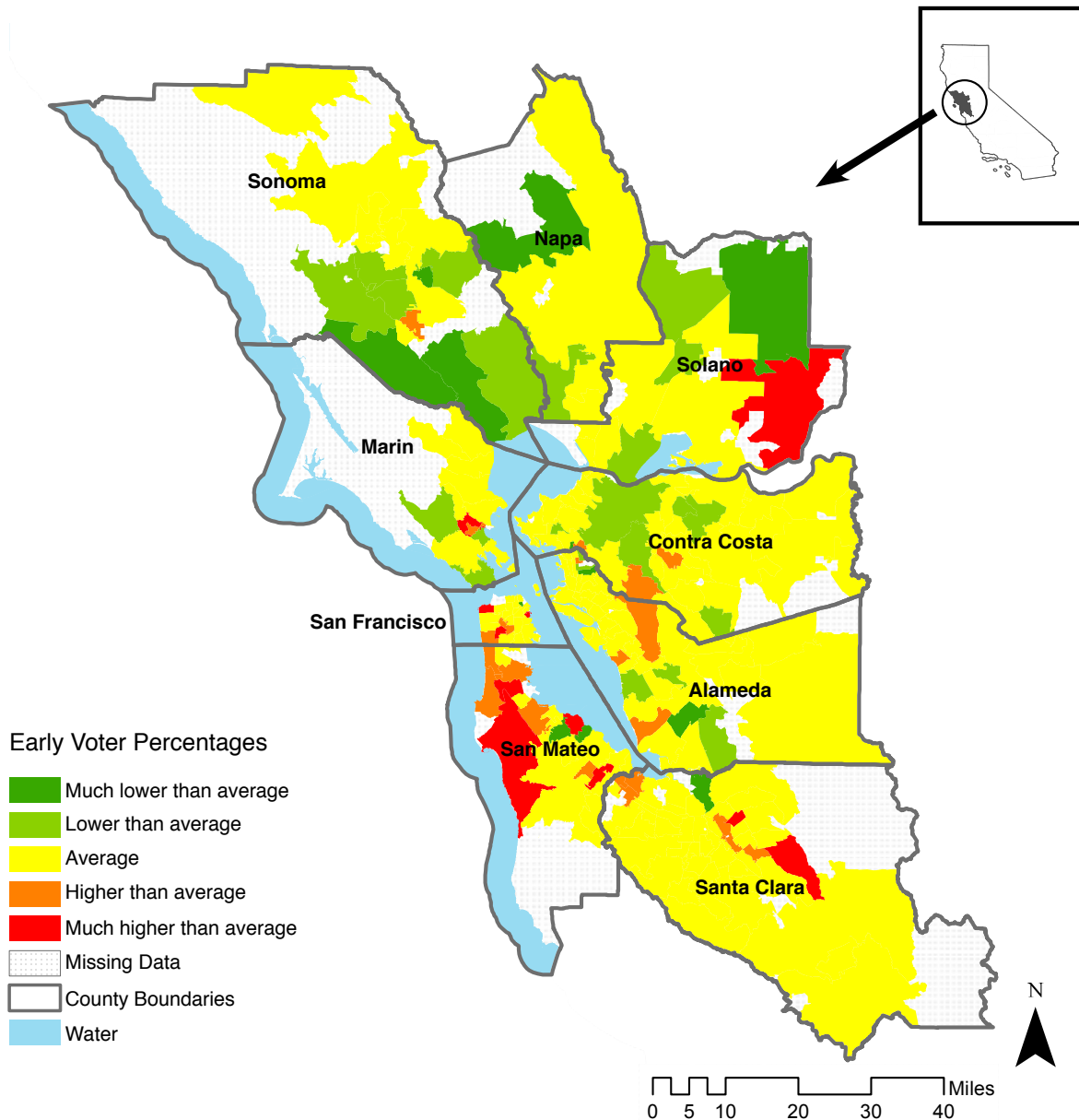


Notes: (a) Data are presented for CA Zips. (b) A hot spot is defined as an area that is overperforming relative to county averages for whites, whereas a cold spot reflects an underperforming area. In the legend, much higher than average = more than 1.96 standard deviations above the norm; higher than average = more than 1 standard deviation above the norm; average = at the mean level and under 1 standard deviation above or below the state average; lower than average = 1 to 1.96 standard deviations below the norm; and much lower than average = more than 1.96 standard deviations below the norm. (c) Map reflects patterns of early voter concentrations using within county estimates. County findings are presented by California regions for summary purposes. Source: Proportions of early voters are based on data obtained from Political Data Incorporated (PDI) (downloaded on June 1, 2014).

Voting and Registration in California: APPENDIX

(Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code by Region)

San Francisco Bay Area Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip, African Americans Relative to Whites

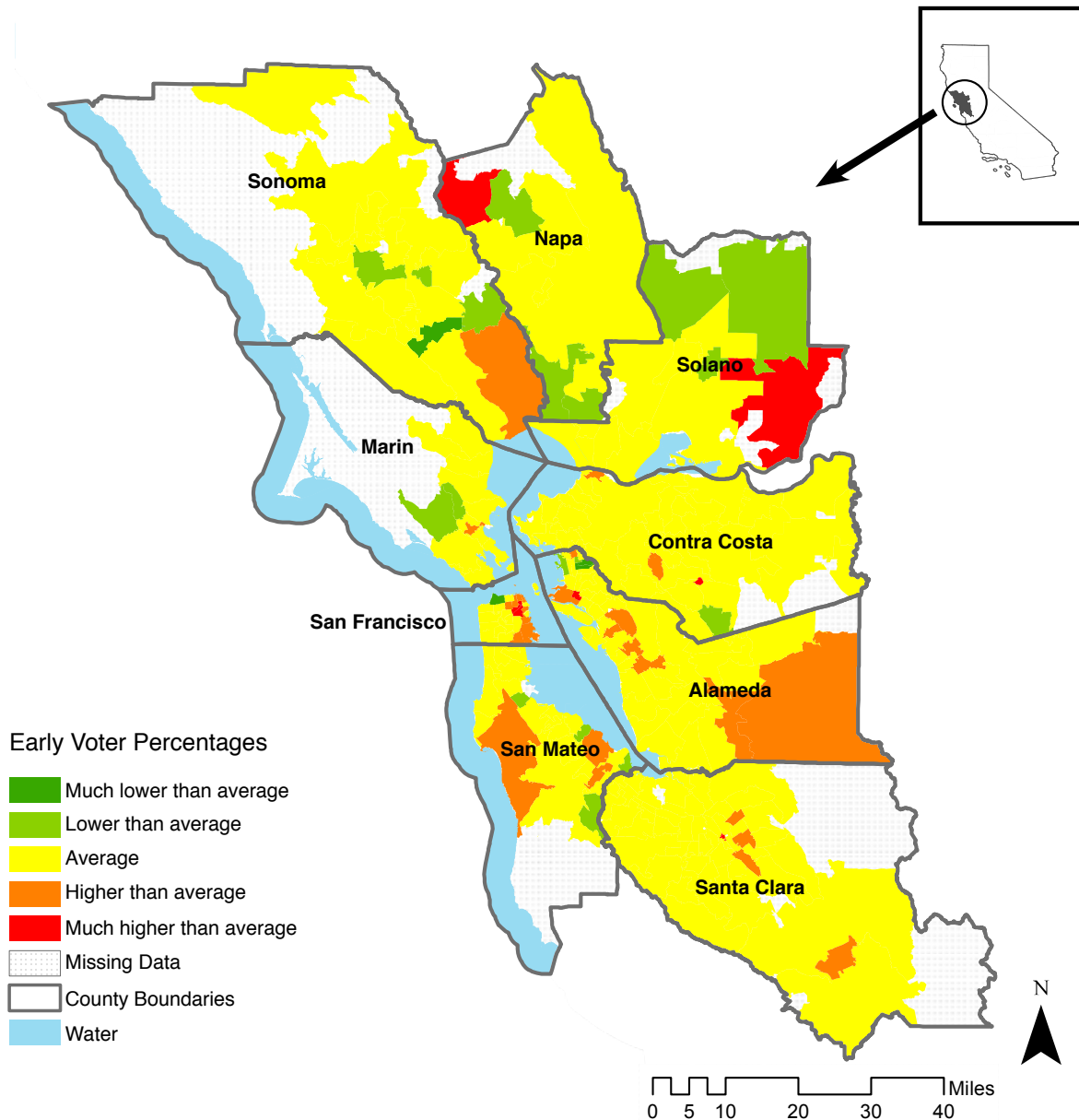


Notes: (a) Data are presented for CA Zips. (b) A hot spot is defined as an area that is overperforming relative to county averages for whites, whereas a cold spot reflects an underperforming area. In the legend, much higher than average = more than 1.96 standard deviations above the norm; higher than average = more than 1 standard deviations above the norm; average = at the mean level and under 1 standard deviation above or below the state average; lower than average = 1 to 1.96 standard deviations below the norm; and much lower than average = more than 1.96 standard deviations below the norm. (c) Map reflects patterns of early voter concentrations using within county estimates. County findings are presented by California regions for summary purposes. Source: Proportions of early voters are based on data obtained from Political Data Incorporated (PDI) (downloaded on June 1, 2014).

Voting and Registration in California: APPENDIX

(Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code by Region)

San Francisco Bay Area Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip, Asians Relative to Whites



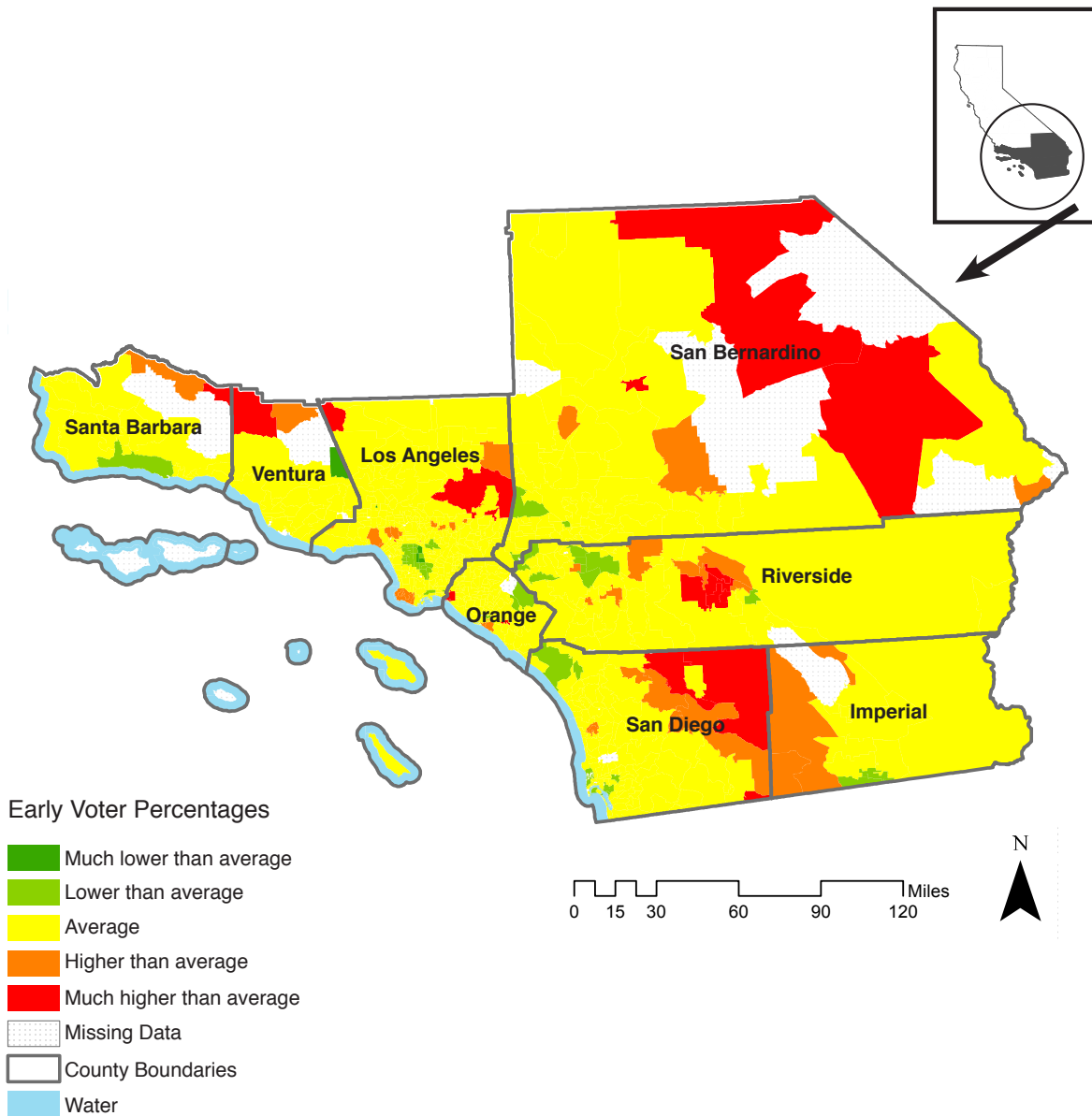
Notes: (a) Data are presented for CA Zips. (b) A hot spot is defined as an area that is overperforming relative to county averages for whites, whereas a cold spot reflects an underperforming area. In the legend, much higher than average = more than 1.96 standard deviations above the norm; higher than average = more than 1 standard deviations above the norm; average = at the mean level and under 1 standard deviation above or below the state average; lower than average = 1 to 1.96 standard deviations below the norm; and much lower than average = more than 1.96 standard deviations below the norm. (c) Map reflects patterns of early voter concentrations using within county estimates. County findings are presented by California regions for summary purposes. Source: Proportions of early voters are based on data obtained from Political Data Incorporated (PDI) (downloaded on June 1, 2014).

Southern California Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code

Voting and Registration in California: APPENDIX

(Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code by Region)

Southern California Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip, Whites

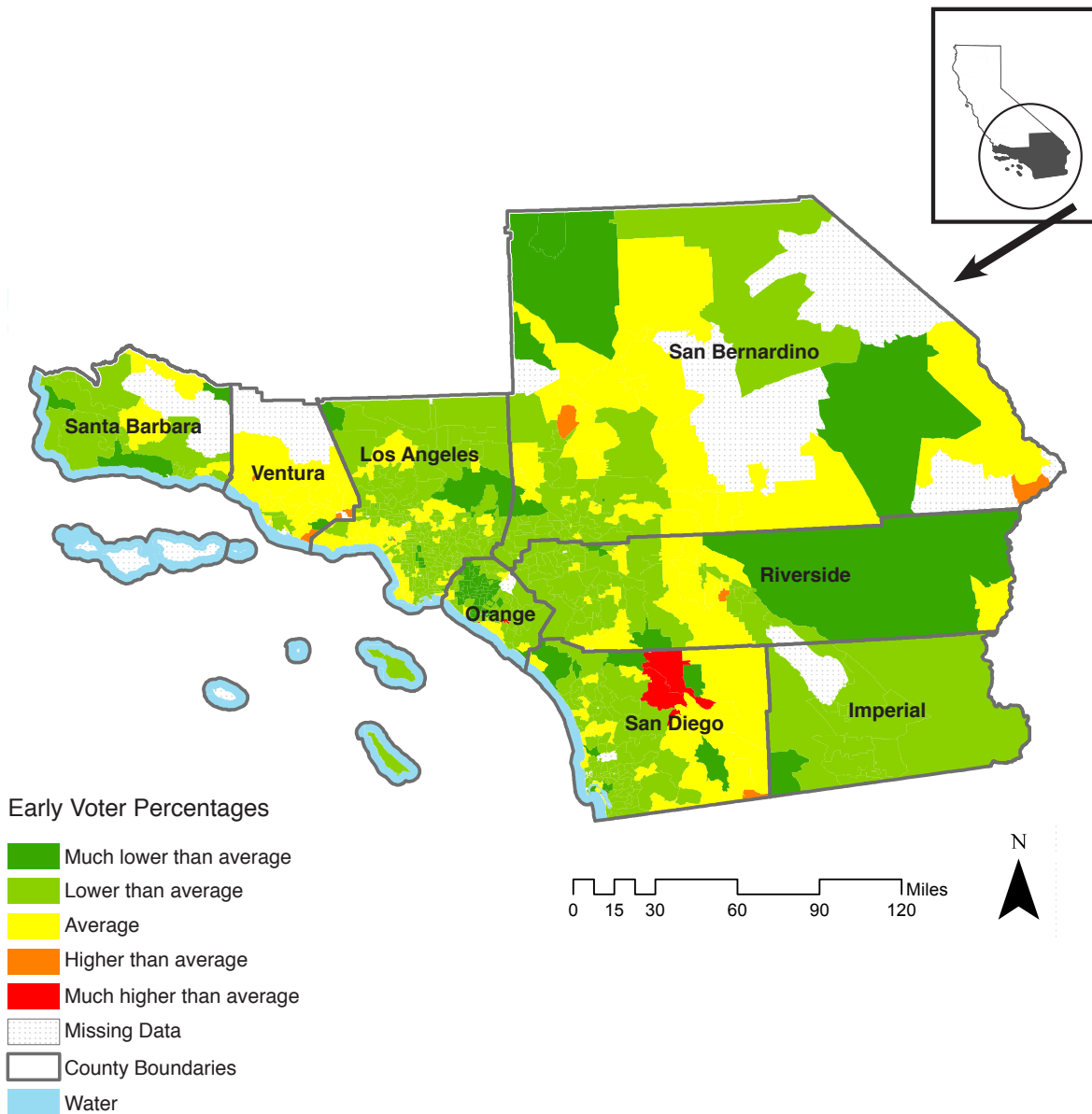


Notes: (a) Data are presented for CA Zips. (b) A hot spot is defined as an area that is overperforming relative to county averages, whereas a cold spot reflects an underperforming area. In the legend, much higher than average = more than 1.96 standard deviations above the norm; higher than average = more than 1 standard deviations above the norm; average = at the mean level and under 1 standard deviation above or below the state average; lower than average = 1 to 1.96 standard deviations below the norm; and much lower than average = more than 1.96 standard deviations below the norm. (c) Map reflects patterns of early voter concentrations using within county estimates. County findings are presented by California regions for summary purposes. Source: Proportions of early voters are based on data obtained from Political Data Incorporated (PDI) (downloaded on June 1, 2014).

Voting and Registration in California: APPENDIX

(Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code by Region)

Southern California Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip, Latinos Relative to Whites

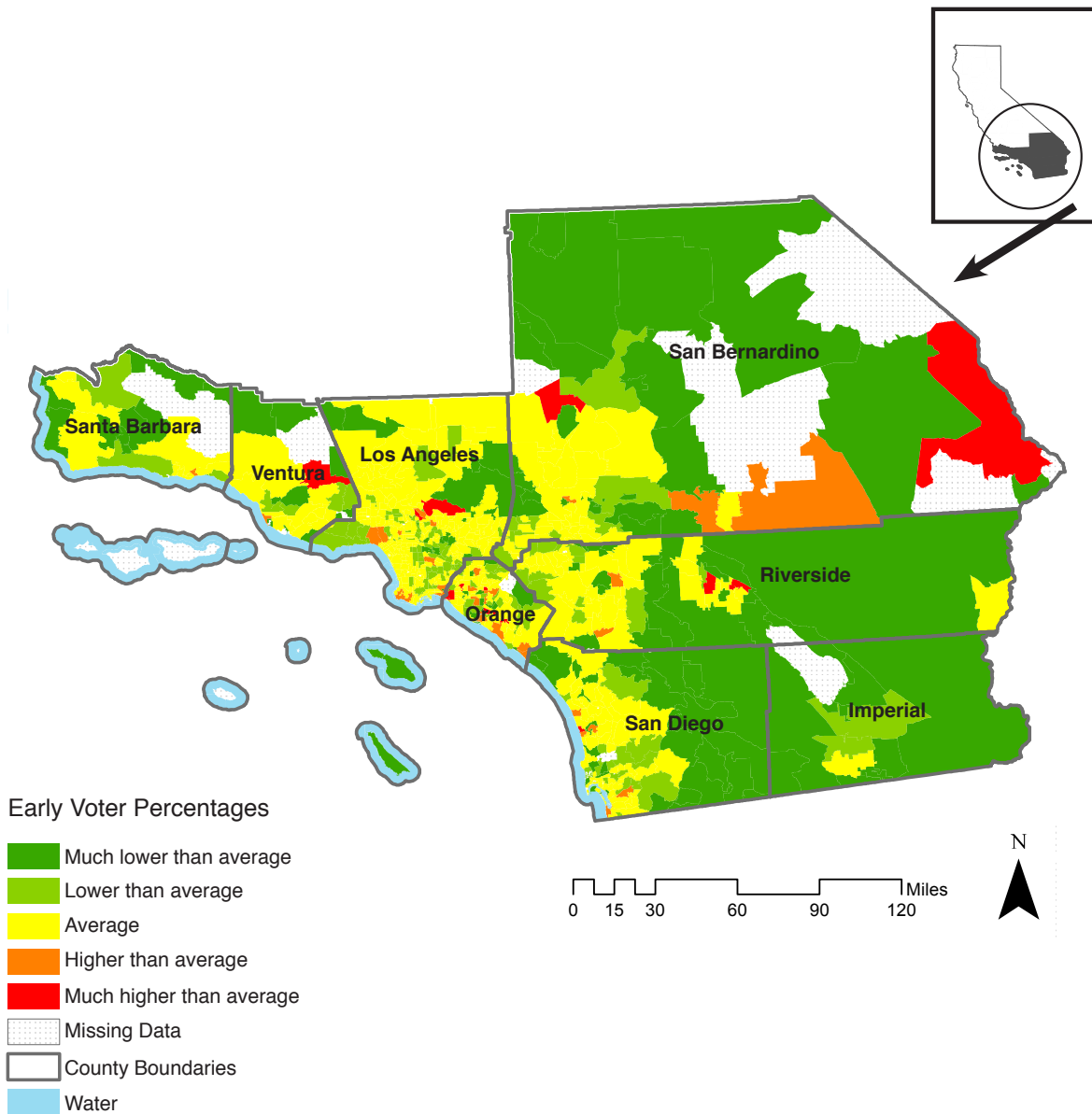


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Voting and Registration in California: APPENDIX

(Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip Code by Region)

Southern California Hotspots of Early Voters by Zip, African Americans Relative to Whites

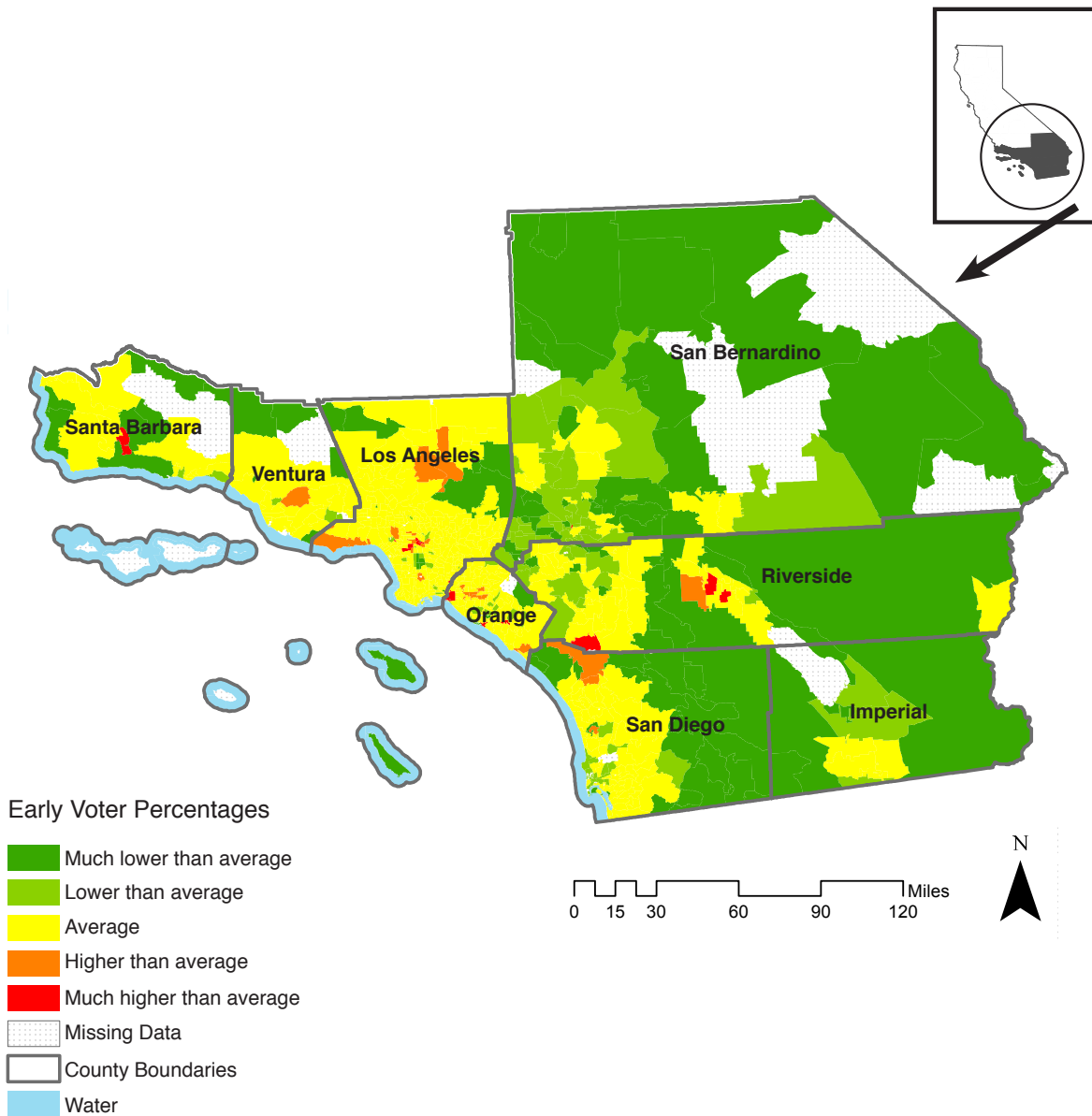


Notes: (a) Data are presented for CA Zips. (b) A hot spot is defined as an area that is overperforming relative to county averages for whites, whereas a cold spot reflects an underperforming area. In the legend, much higher than average = more than 1.96 standard deviations above the norm; higher than average = more than 1 standard deviations above the norm; average = at the mean level and under 1 standard deviation above or below the state average; lower than average = 1 to 1.96 standard deviations below the norm; and much lower than average = more than 1.96 standard deviations below the norm. (c) Map reflects patterns of early voter concentrations using within county estimates. County findings are presented by California regions for summary purposes. Source: Proportions of early voters are based on data obtained from Political Data Incorporated (PDI) (downloaded on June 1, 2014).

Voting and Registration in California: APPENDIX

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