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California Journal of Politics and Policy

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/61q286rr>

Journal

California Journal of Politics and Policy, 6(3)

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Publication Date

2014-07-01

DOI

10.5070/P2BP4J

Peer reviewed

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Differences among Latina/o, Asian American, and White Online Registrants in California

Abstract: In September 2012, the California Secretary of State's office offered eligible voters the opportunity to register online for the first time. This article analyzes those eligible voters that registered online for the November 2012 election. We find important differences among these registrants by ethnorace, age, and gender. We also find that a large proportion of these online registrants were new voters and that they did not concentrate in affluent census tracts, suggesting that this electoral reform did help to expand the electorate for that election.

Keywords: electoral reform; gender; race; registration; socioeconomic status.

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1 Introduction

On 19 September 2012, the state of California launched its online voter registration system. During the just under 5-week window available for eligible voters to register online, 787,337 took advantage of this option.¹ This large take-up by voters is

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 registration method is recorded and maintained by the county registrar-recorder and can be added directly to voter file records. In certain counties, the voter data is not stored in a manner that allows for direct recording of the registration method, which forces PDI to use other means to determine how a voter filed their registration. Of these counties that do not store the registration method directly most have a source code on each voter's actual affidavit number. By parsing out these codes, it is possible to determine which voters filed for registration online. There are, unfortunately, several counties that are unable to record the application source identifier into the voter's affidavit number, which make recovering registration method in those counties impossible via currently available means. Those counties are excluded from this analysis.

especially notable given the state did not advertise its availability, nor did it launch a media campaign to inform voters about this option. Given that, it is reasonable to assume that voters heard about online voter registration from their social networks, local community organizations, or from visits to the secretary of state's website.

Of the online registrants 22.4% were Latina/o ($n=176,465$); 11% were of Asian origin ($n=86,707$); and 60% were White ($n=472,292$).² These numbers are similar to the ethnoracial distribution of November 2012 registrants overall, of whom 22% were Latina/o, 9.1% were Asian American, and 61.4% were White. Our analysis of these voters in Figure 1 shows that young Latinas/os were most likely to register online, Latina/o and Asian American online registrants were strongly Democratic in their party identification, and Latina and Asian American women registered online and turned out at higher rates than Latino and Asian American men. We also find that majorities of Latina/o and White online registrants were low or middle income, rather than affluent. Our analysis makes clear that studies of the California voting population need to look comparatively across ethnoracial³ groups and to consider gender, class, and age differences within those groups.

One of the critiques of electoral reforms such as online registration is that they facilitate registration for those eligible voters who would have registered anyway, making little difference in the make-up of the electorate. To test this proposition, we analyzed how many of the November 2012 online registrants were new voters, defined as voters with no record of having voted in a California election since 2000. We find 73.4% of online registrants were new voters and 82% of new voter online registrants turned out to vote in November 2012 (compared to 72.4% of

2 Our analysis does not include African American voters because most estimates of these voters using publicly available voter information are unreliable. We hope to include these voters in future analyses. We identified Latino voters by merging the state voter file with the U.S. census Spanish surname list. Although the use of this list underestimates the total Latino population (because some Latinos do not have Spanish surnames), the U.S. Census Bureau estimates the surname list captures 93.6% of all Hispanics, with fewer than 5% falsely identified. For a full explanation of the list and its methodology, see Word and Perkins (1996). Asian American voters were similarly identified based on surname, and include Chinese-origin, Korean-origin, Vietnamese-origin, Filipino-origin, and Japanese-origin registrants.

3 We use the term “ethnoracial” to describe these groups in order to capture the intersection between race and ethnicity. Scholars have long debated which is the more appropriate term to describe group experiences. The word race presupposes a common biological or genealogical ancestry among people. Ethnicity places more of an emphasis on cultural practices than on common genetic traits. Many scholars use the terms race/ethnicity or ethnorace to describe the ways in which factors often attributed to culture, such as language, can be racialized. In other words, ascriptive attributions can be based on linguistic or cultural practices that are not “racial” (or biological), but still can have racialized consequences. Because we believe the lived experiences of the populations discussed in this brief include both racialized and ethnic/cultural traits, we describe them as ethnoracial groups.

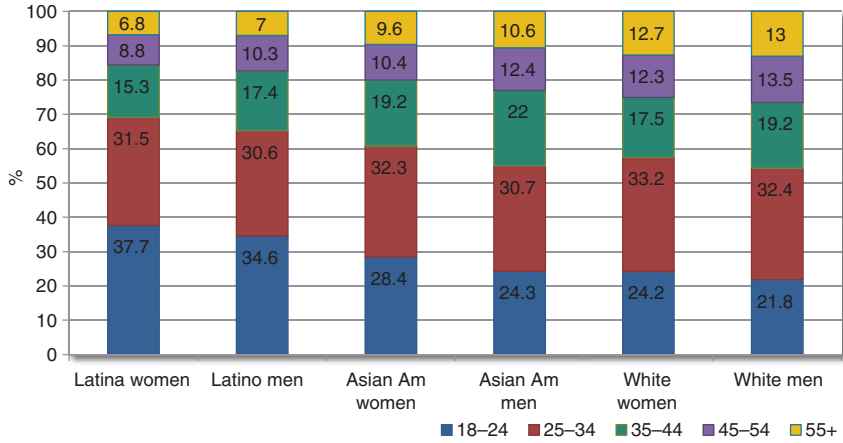


Figure 1: Online Registrants. By Age, Ethnorace, and Gender.

Source: Political Data, Inc., Jan. 2013 County-level Reports.

California’s registered voters overall⁴). Demographically, these new voters were 23% Latina/o (n=135,012), 11.5% Asian American (n=66,694), and 59.2% White (n=342,600).

2 Age, Ethnoracial Group, and Online Registration

Since online registration required the use of technology, the assumption was that youth would be especially likely to take advantage of the opportunity to register online. We find that to be true, with Latina women under 35 most likely to register online and more than half of all online registrants of every ethnoracial group being under 35. However, we also find, particularly among White men, that a significant proportion of eligible voters over 35 registered online as well, suggesting that online registration was not simply a “youth” phenomenon.

3 Gender and Ethnoracial Differences in Party Identification

We then turned to an analysis of party identification across groups. Because party identification in California varies significantly by gender and ethnoracial group,

⁴ As reported by the California Secretary of State.

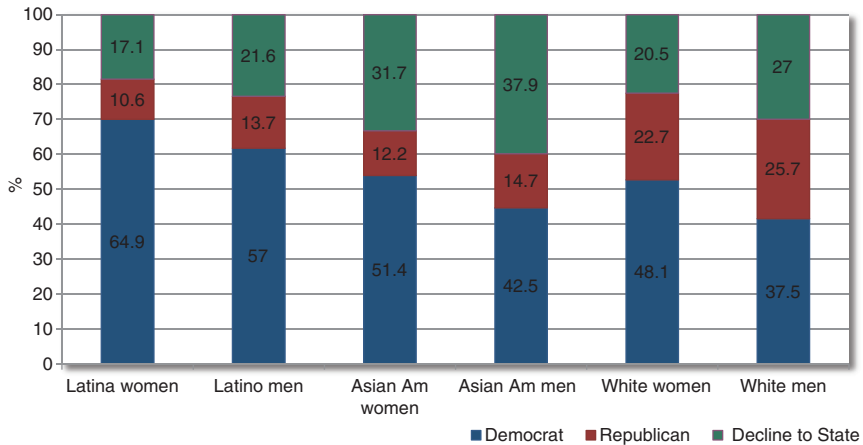


Figure 2: Online Registrant Party Identification, by Ethnorace and Gender.

Source: Political Data, Inc., Jan. 2013 County-level Reports.

we explored the degree to which online registrants reflected this trend. Figure 2 shows that Latina/o and Asian American online registrants were more strongly identified with the Democratic Party than White online registrants.

We see in Figure 2 that women across all ethnoracial groups were more likely to identify with the Democratic Party than the men of each group. However, only in the cases of Latina women and Asian American women do we see a majority of women identifying Democratic. It is also important to note, however, that Latino men who registered online for the November 2012 election were significantly more likely to identify as Democrats than White female online registrants, suggesting the need to pay attention to how ethnorace and gender interact in relation to party identification. Women of color, then, rather than White women, are driving the gender gap in Democratic registration among online registrants. Latina/o and Asian American online registrants, male and female, were nearly half as likely to identify with the Republican Party than White male and female online registrants.

4 The Gender Gap

Figure 3 considers these differences across ethnorace and gender in terms of online registration and turnout rates. Among Latinos, women made up almost 55% of online registrants and just over 55% of Latina/o online registrant voters.

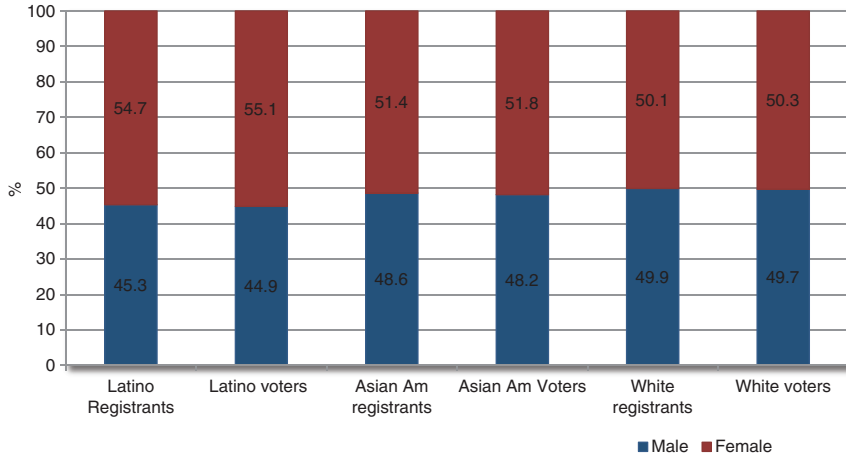


Figure 3: Online Registration and Turnout, by Ethnorace and Gender.

Source: Political Data, Inc., Jan. 2013 County-level Reports.

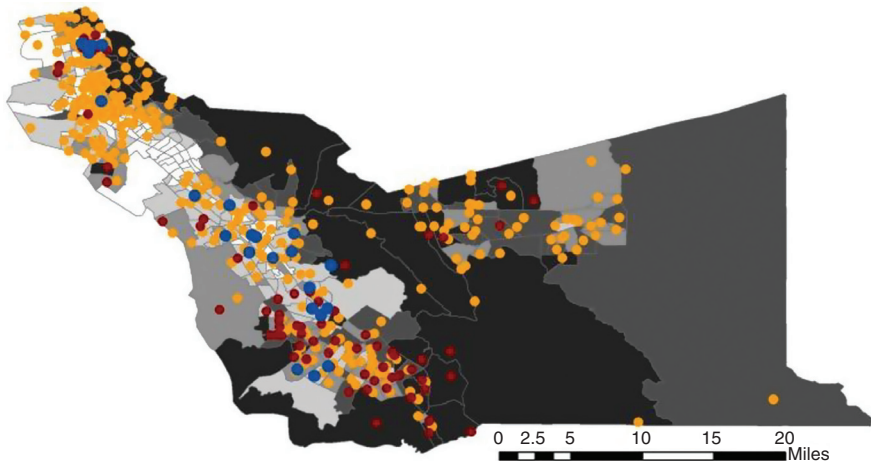
Asian American women were more likely to register online and turnout than their male counterparts as well. It is only among White registrants and voters that we see near gender parity in registration and turnout. Given the gender differences discussed above in relation to party identification, this gender gap among Latinos and Asian Americans ensures that each group’s electorate is significantly more identified with the Democratic Party, helping to explain the overwhelming support Democratic candidates had among Latina/o and Asian American voters in November 2012.

5 Socioeconomic Status and Online Registration

One of the common critiques of electoral reforms like online voter registration is that, rather than alleviating inequalities in the demographic make-up of the electorate, these types of reforms can increase inequality because they tend to be used by the most affluent and privileged voters. To test this theory, we looked more in depth at two counties that had among the highest proportion of online registrants in November 2012 – Alameda County in northern California and San Diego County in southern California. Both counties were among the highest in the state in terms of online registrants for that election: 49,483 for Alameda County and 80,225 for San Diego County. Both counties have diverse populations but vary in terms of ideology, with voters in San Diego being, on average, more conserva-

tive than voters in Alameda County. Both counties also contain significant low, mid, and upper-income census tracts, allowing us to situate their online registrants within their socioeconomic contexts. An exploration of these two counties, representing different parts of the state and different ideological perspectives, allows us to test whether or not, in fact, online registrants tended to come from the more affluent sectors of California's eligible voting population.

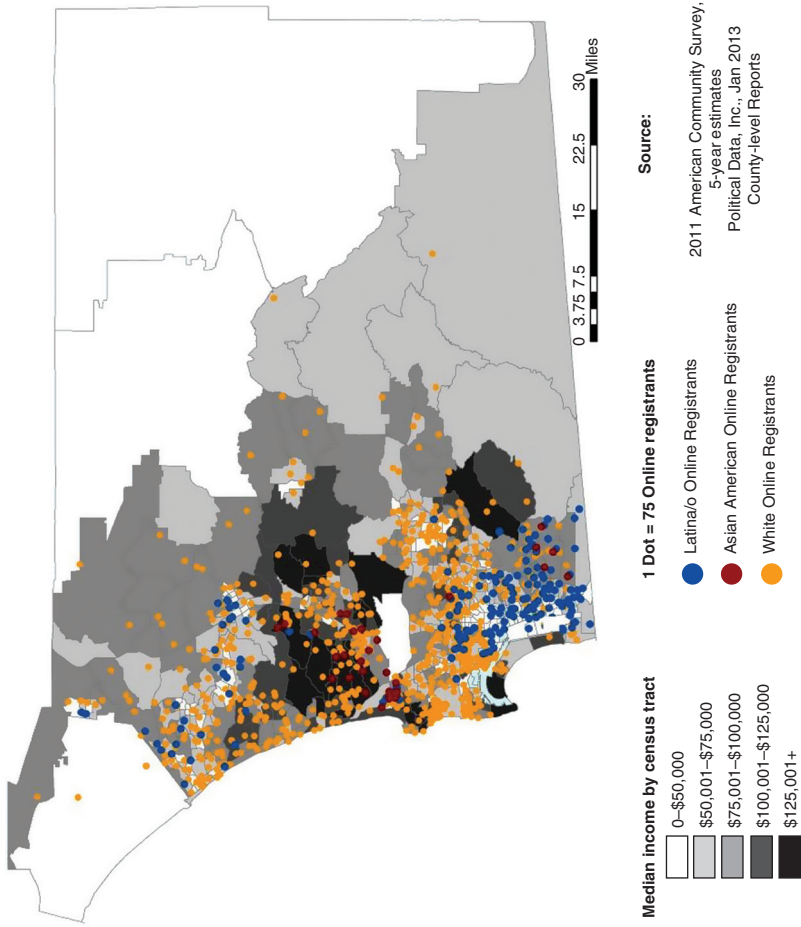
To do this analysis, we used Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to plot each individual online registrant (based on their address in the voter file) within their particular census tract.⁵ The census tract colors vary depending on where the tracts fall in terms of median income, which we calculated using data from the 2011 American Community Survey (5-year estimates). Maps 1 and 2 summarize this analysis, situating White, Latina/o, and Asian American online registrants within their particular census tracts.⁶



Map 1: Alameda County Online Registrants.
By Ethnorace & Median Income. (See Map 2 for key.)

⁵ Of online registrants 1.4% (n=701) reported by Alameda County and 2.3% (n=2044) of those reported by San Diego County had addresses that were located outside the county boundaries. These registrants have been excluded from the GIS analysis. With those individuals removed, our Alameda County sample contains: 6422 Latinas/os; 8816 Asian Americans; and 25,988 Whites. San Diego County includes: 18,452 Latinas/os; 6442 Asian Americans, and 57,743 White online registrants.

⁶ Each dot on Maps 1 and 2 represents 75 online registrants located in that tract. If a tract contained fewer than 75 online registrants from that ethnoracial group, no dot appears. But, readers should keep in mind that those tracts may contain smaller numbers of online registrants from that ethnoracial group even though they do not appear on the maps.



Map 2: San Diego County Online Registrants.
By Ethnorace & Median Income.

We see in Maps 1 and 2 that online registrants were not concentrated in the most affluent areas within these two counties. In Alameda County, 5% of Latina/o, 14% of White, and 21% of Asian American online registrants lived in census tracts with median incomes greater than \$125,000 per year. Conversely, 65% of Latina/o, 52% of White, and 44% of Asian American online registrants lived in census tracts with median incomes lower than \$75,000 per year. The income picture for online registrants is similar in San Diego County. There, 2% of Latina/o, 6% of White, and 12% of Asian American online registrants lived in census tracts with median incomes of over \$125,000 per year and 71% of Latina/o, 57% of White, and 50% of Asian American online registrants lived in tracts with median incomes of less than \$75,000 per year. What is striking is that, for Latinas/os and whites in both counties, significant majorities of online registrants came from the low and middle-income parts of each county. Among Asian American online registrants, a near majority also lived in these lower-income census tracts. This strongly suggests that online registration is not simply being used by affluent, already likely voters, but rather that it was less affluent eligible voters who most took advantage of the opportunity to register online.

6 Conclusion

Advocates for online registration argued that it would make the registration process more open and accessible to a broader range of voters. Our analysis suggests this reform was successful in that regard, particularly given that almost three fourths of online registrants were new voters. In our county-level analysis, we saw that Latina/o and White voters who registered online tended to come from densely populated low and middle-income census tracts. Given voters in California are, on average, significantly more affluent than the general population, this study suggests that online voter registration opened up the registration and voting process to a wider range of voters in terms of their socioeconomic status. Our in-group analysis also shows that the demographic and political profile of online registrants varied in important ways by ethnoracial group and gender. This analysis makes clear that we need to disaggregate among eligible voters in order to fully understand how ethnorace, class, and gender intersect to influence the political dispositions and behavior of California's registrants and voters.

Acknowledgments: Our thanks to Christina Chong for her help with the brief's layout and to the California Civic Engagement Project's Mindy Romero for her

feedback on our data and analysis. This research was supported by funding from PowerPAC.org. Any errors that remain are our own.

Reference

1. Word, David L. and R. Colby Perkins (1996) *Building a Spanish Surname List for the 1990's – A New Approach to an Old Problem*. Technical Working Paper No. 13. Washington: U.S. Census Bureau.