



#### From Barriers to Ballots: Identifying and Reducing Voting Barriers for Young People

*Professor Laura Wray-Lake, Dr. Chris Wegemer, Ryo Sato, Leslie Ortiz, & Amy Wong,  
UCLA Department of Social Welfare (wraylake@luskin.ucla.edu)*

*In California, the voting rate among 18-24-year-olds is 20% lower than any other age group, a greater disparity than the national average<sup>1</sup>. Despite recent progress, youth experience systemic barriers to voting. Voter registration is a persistent challenge to California youth that is unevenly experienced across jurisdictions that can be addressed through policy change.*

#### **Structural Barriers to Voting**

In California, nearly 2 million eligible voters ages 18-24 do not vote and are therefore politically unrepresented<sup>2</sup>. **Structural barriers — policies and practices that systematically disadvantage young people in electoral participation — are partly responsible for low youth voting rates.** These include disproportionate administrative burdens for first-time voters, politically motivated disenfranchisement of college voters, and restrictive voter ID laws that unequally affect youth<sup>3,4,5</sup>. Age also intersects with race, class, disability status, and other factors to create more structural barriers for some youth than others<sup>6</sup>. **Young voters merit special attention from policymakers,** and proactive policies are needed amid rising anti-democratic sentiments in some jurisdictions in California<sup>7</sup> that would hinder youth political engagement.

#### **Current Policy Landscape**

In 2020, California ranked 25<sup>th</sup> nationally for its youth registration rate<sup>1</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> for its youth voting rate<sup>8</sup>. **Studies have consistently identified registration as the primary obstacle to youth voting<sup>9</sup>.** California recently implemented same-day and online voter registration policies, both of which have facilitated electoral access for young people<sup>10,11,12,13</sup>. However, **youth registration rates vary substantially across counties** (see **Figure 1**), suggesting that promotive policies and practices are unevenly implemented. Further, **California's voter pre-registration process is egregiously underutilized,** with only 12.9% of eligible 16 and 17 year olds pre-registered<sup>14</sup> (see **Figure 2**). The decline in youth driver's licenses<sup>15</sup> may be partly responsible, as the DMV accounts for the vast majority of registrations in California.

Beyond registration, young people face structural barriers to voting. The cost of electoral participation that young people bear is cumulative across numerous barriers<sup>16,17</sup>. In our own research of the 2020 election, we found that voter suppression was a prevalent concern for young people, and first-time voters and youth who are marginalized along lines of race, immigration status, or disability may be especially

vulnerable to intimidation. In part a response to such challenges, most young adults chose not to vote in person, either voting by mail or using a secure ballot box. **Universal vote-by-mail has increased voter participation in California and remains important for supporting democratic participation<sup>18</sup>.**

#### **Policy Recommendations**

**1. Reinforce promotive policies.** California's Voter's Choice Act of 2016 has made voting more accessible for young people, but not all counties have implemented it. **The VCA should be fully implemented across all counties** and studied to determine its long-term impacts.

**2. Allow 17-year-old primary voting.** Allowing 17-year-olds to vote in primaries if they turn 18 before the general election is a modest, logical step toward facilitating the political inclusion of young people. **There are 20 states with such policies, but California is not among them.** Implementation in California requires a constitutional amendment. California lawmakers have failed to advance this measure multiple times, which suggests clearer messaging about the benefits for long-term voter participation may be necessary.

**3. Implement secure automatic voter registration (AVR).** California Senate Bill 299 would implement secure AVR at designated agencies, which would automatically register citizens to vote unless they opt-out. Nine states have such a policy, and some have also integrated secure AVR into state services, such as Medicare and health insurance exchanges<sup>19,20</sup>. Secure AVR increases registration rates in general and for youth<sup>21</sup>. The Institute for Responsive Government estimates that secure AVR would save California over \$9 million each election cycle<sup>22</sup>.

**4. Fund schools to support voter registration.** California Assembly Bill 2627, recently held in committee, would have provided funding for high schools to offer voter registration activities. We recommend expanding this bill to **provide funding to all public high schools in California and requiring voter registration efforts and its integration with civic education initiatives.**



## From Barriers to Ballots: Identifying and Reducing Voting Barriers for Young People

Figure 1: 2020 youth registration rates<sup>23,24</sup>

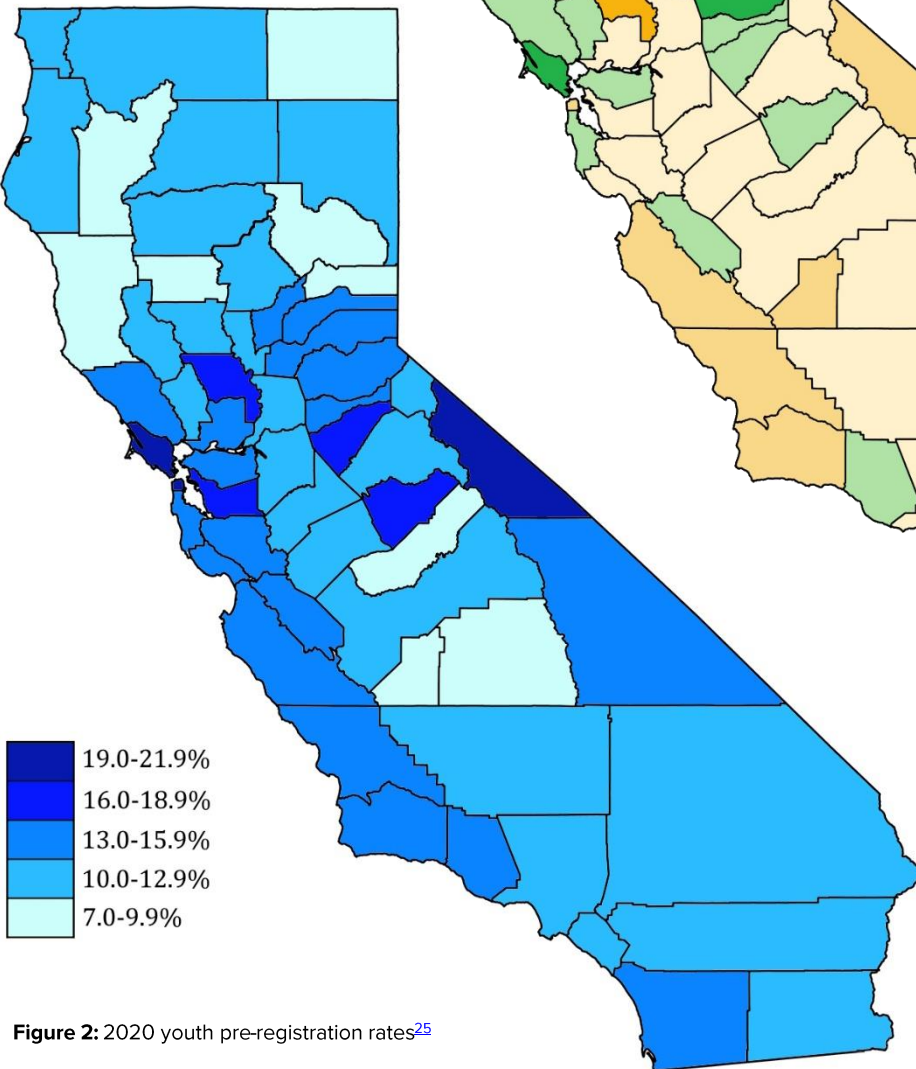
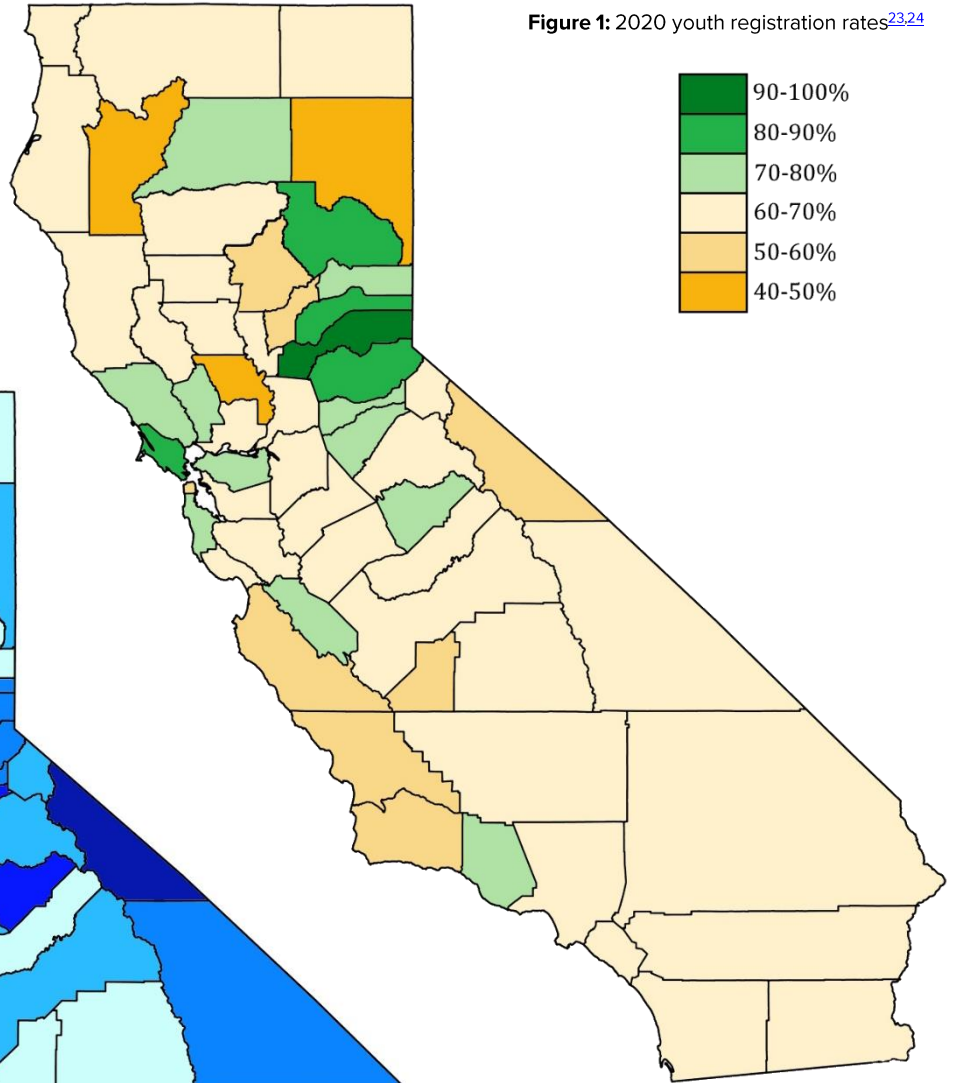


Figure 2: 2020 youth pre-registration rates<sup>25</sup>