



# UC Center Sacramento

**2024 UCCS “Grow Our Own” Public Lectureship  
and White Paper Award Winner**

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



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## Introduction to the 2023-24 UCCS White Paper and Public Lectureship

UC Center Sacramento is a systemwide program of the University of California that seeks to educate California's future leaders and disseminate research relevant to public policy. The program aims to imbue students with an appreciation for public service, the value of evidence, and the importance of respectful, fact-based dialog. At the same time, the program provides opportunities for UC researchers to share knowledge generated on the 10 campuses and 3 National Laboratories with policymakers in the executive and legislative branches of state government.

In 2023-24, with support from UCOP (the "Grow Our Own" initiative led by Academic Affairs), UC Center was able to sponsor a systemwide competition. Faculty and trainee teams were invited to submit proposals under two categories:

- **Promoting Environmental Justice.** Projects related to this theme will document and address the unfair distribution of environmental burdens, remedies, or both across the state;
- **Creating a More Functional Democracy.** Projects related to this theme will highlight evidence-based approaches for enhancing voter participation, encouraging civic engagement, and culling legal and administrative impediments that impede government's ability to address the state's most pressing challenges.

After careful review of applications received from throughout the UC system, the Selection Committee selected the submission by Professor Laura Wray-Lake and Postdoctoral Scholar Christopher Wegemer. Their White Paper, published here, combines a critical review of the literature with an original empirical survey to identify barriers and obstacles that stand in the way of participation in elections by younger voters. Though they don't say this, their approach is a thoughtful application of Bayesian thinking to research synthesis: starting with what is known, layering on what's new, and drawing conclusions based on the preponderance of evidence.

The UCLA team should also be congratulated for involving UCLA undergraduates in the research, writing, and presenting. The purpose of the "Grow Our Own" Initiative is to diversify the academy by supporting UC students to see their own potential. We are hopeful that this is one of many evidence-based publications ultimately authored by the junior members of the UCLA team.

Richard Kravitz, MD, MSPH  
UCCS Director  
May 29, 2024

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

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Although today's young people are civically engaged and politically active in many ways<sup>1</sup>, young people continue to vote at lower rates than older age groups. For example, in the 2020 election, 47.4% of 18-24-year-olds in California voted, which was 20% lower than any other age group<sup>2</sup>. Young people's lower voting rates are a serious cause for concern: Young people – who are the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in the nation's history<sup>3</sup> – are not being equally represented in elections. Their unique needs and interests are thus not well reflected in policy decisions. Young people have first-hand knowledge of, and vested interests in, policy issues that are not always prioritized by older age groups. Additionally, voting as a young person can establish life-long voting habits and set a foundation for democratic engagement across the lifespan<sup>4</sup>. Initiatives that enhance young people's access to voting are worthwhile now and will pay dividends in the future.

For decades, scholars and others have levied blame on young people for their lower voting rates, arguing that young people are too uninterested, uninformed, or self-interested to vote<sup>5,6</sup>. However, there is an alternative explanation for lower youth voter turnout: structural barriers. These obstacles are the policies and practices that systematically disadvantage young people in electoral participation. Importantly, age intersects with race, class, and disability status to create more structural barriers for some youth than others<sup>7</sup>.

Our research aimed to identify key structural barriers young people face in voting and policy levers to reduce these barriers. We used three complementary methods: a rapid review to synthesize research on structural barriers to youth voting and evidence-based policy solutions, an analysis of how California fares on policies that promote and hinder voting for young people, and original data analysis from a nationwide survey of 866 18-25-year-olds after the 2020 election to give insight into young people's experiences of voting barriers.<sup>a</sup> Findings are organized around three main areas: registration, voting, and cumulative costs of voting barriers, and we conclude by summarizing policy recommendations.

### **Structural Barriers to Registration**

Registration serves a gatekeeping function for voting in the U.S., as 69.1% of eligible adults and only 49.1% of eligible young adults were registered to vote in 2022<sup>7,9</sup>. In California, the registration rate as of 2022 is 67.3% across age groups, and 48.3% of 18–24-year-olds are registered<sup>10</sup>. Despite national efforts to increase the ease of voter registration, such as the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, voter registration remains the primary barrier to young people casting their vote<sup>11</sup>. Registering requires proving one's identity and residency, which takes various administrative steps depending on the jurisdiction. These hurdles are typically more arduous for younger adults than older adults because young people experience many transitions including leaving high school, starting college or employment, and moving to new residences. An estimated 26.8% of 18-24-year-olds changed residences in a one-year period (5.9% moved across state lines), more than double the mobility of the general population (12.9% moved, 2.5% to a different state)<sup>12</sup>. Mobility requires updating one's voter registration, which involves administrative paperwork, often significantly ahead of election day<sup>13</sup>, and people who move often forget to re-register in advance of an election<sup>14</sup>. The age disparities in registration coupled with young adults' unique life circumstances and heightened mobility point to age differentiated barriers to registration.

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<sup>a</sup> Literature review and survey methodologies are detailed in Appendix A and B, respectively.

College students have been a major focus of research on structural barriers to registration, as they often must navigate registration or re-registration in different counties or states from their permanent residence, which can have different requirements and procedures<sup>11</sup>. For college students, determining whether and how to register to vote with their campus address or home address produces considerable confusion in the registration process<sup>15</sup>. Although the Supreme Court has held that requiring residency longer than 30 days as a prerequisite for voting eligibility violates the Fourteenth Amendment, many states have 30-day residency requirements to register that make it difficult for first-time voting college students to establish residency where they attend school prior to a November election<sup>11</sup>.

Compounding these barriers to registration are concerted efforts by some cities, counties, and states to enact policies that make it more difficult for college students to vote. For example, there is a long history of college students' residency being questioned or challenged to prevent students from voting where they go to school<sup>16</sup>. A larger distance between college students' home address and college predicts lower likelihood of voting<sup>17</sup>, suggesting that college students who are unable to return home to vote may have difficulty registering and voting where they attend college. Other states and counties have restricted college student voting by not recognizing college student identification (ID) cards as a valid form of ID for registering to vote<sup>18,19</sup>.

Importantly, even with the barriers to registration facing them, college students are more likely to be registered to vote than non-college attending young adults. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, of 18-24-year-olds who were U.S. citizens, 45.1% of non-college attending youth had registered to vote, compared to 72.3% registered among youth with some college or more<sup>20</sup>. (Nationwide, 44.3% of 18-24-year-olds had not attended college in 2020.<sup>21</sup>) Non-college attending young people are also more likely to be negatively impacted by restrictive photo ID laws for registration and voting<sup>22</sup>. For all young adults, registration policies are more or less restrictive depending on one's state of residence. State variation in restrictive registration policies parallels the large variability in young adults' registration and voter turnout rates by state<sup>23</sup>. In 2020, youth registration rates ranged from 41.9% in Nevada to 86.9% in New Jersey<sup>24</sup>.

In our nationwide survey, although most young people we surveyed were registered to vote (90.5%), barriers to registration were still common. Young people were most likely to name procedural barriers to registering – challenges around where and how to register – and emphasized challenges related to moving and navigating cumbersome systems. For example, one young person said, “I didn’t realize my voting status was suspended due to moving. I didn’t realize until days before registration closed, so I had to mail in my updated registration information and hoped it worked out.” Another young person expressed that the process of changing their address associated with registration after moving was “unnecessarily difficult.” A young person from Texas registered to vote “weeks in advance” but the system never showed they were registered and calls to the registrar’s office yielded no information. After going to vote provisionally, the young person was told that “my name was probably in stacks of people’s registration that never got entered into the system! Apparently, they were “too busy” to register everyone!! I almost didn’t get to vote!”.

Procedural barriers to voter registration appear to affect some young people more deeply, including young people with disabilities, like the young person who said their challenge to registering was “driving to update my ID because I am epileptic and at times cannot drive.” Multiple young people named depression as an obstacle. A young person in our study directly stated that “racism makes it harder to register to vote.” Connecting these barriers, some expressed a broader view that restrictive registration and voting policies disenfranchise particular groups, such as the young person who wrote, “strict voter identification laws...end up hurting groups who are already disenfranchised, like young people, people of color, people with disabilities, and people who make very little money.” Overall, research is lacking that considers

differences in procedural barriers to voting for young people by race, class, disability, and other factors, and more comprehensive research in this area is sorely needed.

### *California Registration Policies*

California ranks 25th in the nation for its youth registration rate<sup>10</sup>. Despite this middle ranking, California has some of the most progressive registration policies, and evidence points to benefits of these policies for youth voter registration. For example, California passed same-day voter registration (also known as conditional voter registration) in 2012 and implemented this policy statewide by 2017<sup>25</sup>. Thus, 2020 was the first national election in which same-day registration was fully in effect in California. Research shows that California's registration rate increased by 10 percentage points from 2016 to 2020, in part owing to same-day voter registration, although this increase was smaller for 18-24-year-old voters, at 4.5 percentage points<sup>26</sup>. Likewise, in states with same-day registration, the likelihood of voting for young people ages 18-24 increased by 3.1 to 7.3% percentage points, with greater increases during presidential election years<sup>14</sup>. Young voters are more likely to utilize same-day registration options than older voters<sup>18,26</sup>, so this policy may especially benefit young people. Additionally, California has also allowed online voter registration (OVR) since 2012<sup>27</sup>, and research has shown that online registration increases registration and voting by 2 percentage points on average for young people<sup>28,29</sup>. That said, in the 2020 election, California rejected 11.4% of new voter registrations received by the state, which was much higher than the national average of 6.2%<sup>30</sup>. This statistic may suggest problems in disseminating accurate and clear information about registration, an arduous registration process, or other issues, underscoring the need for future research.

To better understand young people's voter registration in California, we estimated county-level youth voter registration rates using data from the U.S. Census and California Secretary of State. Figure 1 displays the 2020 youth voter registration rates across California's 58 counties. The highest registration rate was in Placer County, where 94.3% of young people ages 18 to 25 were registered to vote. The lowest was in Trinity County, with 40% of 18-25-year-olds registered. In the three largest counties in California – Los Angeles (66.8%), San Diego (62.4%), and Orange (69.7%) – around two-thirds of 18-25-year-olds were registered. Reasons for these variations merit further investigation, with additional research needed to determine the county-level practices that are optimal for supporting youth voter registration.

California also implemented pre-registration in 2016<sup>31</sup>, which allows 16- and 17-year-olds to pre-register to vote if they meet other eligibility requirements. This policy aims to engage young people earlier in the democratic process<sup>32</sup>, and evidence shows that states with pre-registration have a higher youth voter turnout rate by 2% on average<sup>33,34</sup>. Across states, pre-registration largely occurs through Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) offices<sup>34</sup>. The California Motor Voter Program, established in 1993, and updated to a more automated approach in 2015, automatically registers individuals to vote (unless they opt out) when they obtain their driver's license or state ID card<sup>35</sup>. Despite this well-intended policy, very few 16- and 17-year-olds in California are pre-registered to vote. As of October 2023, only 12.9% or 133,478 of 16- and 17-year-olds in California were pre-registered out of a little over 1 million estimated to be eligible, with rates varying across counties from 7% to 21%<sup>36</sup>. Young people today are much less likely to get their driver's license: the Federal Highway Administration reported that 25.3% of 16-year-olds and 39.5% of 19-year-olds nationally had a driver's license in 2021, down from 43.1% and 64%, respectively, in 1996<sup>37</sup>.

Some argue that pre-registration may be more effective when tied to civic education efforts<sup>38</sup>, and accumulating evidence suggests that registration drives and information disseminated in classrooms can increase youth registration rates<sup>15,39,40</sup>. California has several state-level efforts in place to support civic education. California law allows voter registration in high schools and established high school voter

education weeks (AB 1817)<sup>41</sup>. However, the state provides no direct funding for these initiatives, leaving many schools unable to implement large-scale efforts to register students to vote. California law gives middle and high school students one excused absence per year for civic or political activities<sup>42</sup> and offers a State Seal of Civic Engagement for students who have “demonstrated excellence in civics education and participation and an understanding of the United States Constitution, the California Constitution, and the democratic system of government” (AB 24, par. 2)<sup>41</sup>. California also allows students ages 16 and older to serve as poll workers, provided they are U.S. citizens and students in good standing, with a GPA of 2.5 or higher<sup>43</sup>. A study conducted in Minneapolis, Minnesota found that youth voter turnout was highest in precincts with larger numbers of student poll workers, and the young poll workers gained valuable knowledge and democratic skills through participating<sup>44</sup>. Overall, California has a documented commitment to bringing young people into electoral participation through high school education, yet clearly more effort is needed, as California is not maximizing the potential of its pre-registration policy.

### **Structural Barriers to Voting**

Beyond registration, young people also face structural barriers to voting. As one indicator of heightened barriers, young people are more likely to cast provisional ballots – ballots cast by voters who are not on the official registration list at a polling location – compared to older adults<sup>45</sup>, a pattern also evident in California<sup>26</sup>. Provisional ballots suggest a range of challenges experienced in the voting process, such as problems with voter registration and confusion around one’s polling place<sup>18</sup>.

Yet, many young people do not vote, and the structural barriers young people face in voting are often localized to cities and towns. Evidence is clear that local election officials have strategically moved polling places away from college campuses to obstruct student voting in cities and towns across Florida, North Carolina, New Jersey, and New York<sup>19</sup>. In other cases, limited quantities of voting machines and polling locations in areas densely populated by young people cause long lines on election days and limit youth voting<sup>46</sup>. Local officials in some states have also used gerrymandering – redrawing voting precinct boundaries – to divide college campuses and reduce young people’s voting power<sup>19</sup>. Restrictive voting policies and practices ranging from requiring IDs to vote and restricting which IDs qualify as legitimate, gerrymandering to reduce the voting power of youth, and removal of polling places are documented tactics of voter suppression and recognized as intentional efforts to disenfranchise young voters<sup>18,19,47,48</sup>. Racism also underlies restrictive voting policies across the country<sup>7</sup>, and voter suppression by age and race often interact, as is evident when Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have been explicit targets of restrictive voting policies<sup>19</sup>. Another documented motivation for youth voter suppression is partisanship, as many people, and especially those in political power, tend to assume that young adults are more liberal-leaning and that college students will vote differently from locals and thus have an outsized influence on local politics<sup>19</sup>.

These structural barriers, embedded in local policies and practices, translate to young people’s views and experiences of voting. Among young adults we surveyed, voter suppression and intimidation were prevalent concerns. More than half (58.0%) agreed with the statement that “Some political leaders try to prevent young people from voting,” 43.0% believed people were being intimidated at the polls, and 35.6% believed eligible voters would be told they weren’t allowed to vote. Moreover, young people believed that certain groups were more subject to voter suppression, with 68.6% of our sample agreeing that some political leaders suppress the votes of Black people and 69.5% agreeing that some political leaders suppress the votes of poor people.

Furthermore, young adults expressed various fears that suggest a larger climate of youth intimidation, whether intentional or not. In the aftermath of Trump’s false claims about electoral integrity, conservative politicians threatened legal consequences for ballot mistakes and improper attempts of same-day registration<sup>49</sup>, which may intimidate first-time voters. For example, one young person felt fear around

political tensions that may erupt at polling places and said: “Voting is no longer a private matter. It feels unsafe now.” Others shared this view, reporting that the biggest challenge they faced to voting was “fear of being attacked based on my vote.” Still others expressed fear of “harassment, intimidation, etc.”, specifically for identity characteristics, with one person saying: “I was scared to vote in person, because I feared that racists would be near my polling place.” These experiences suggest that the larger election climate and policy environment may be unwelcoming to young voters, and particularly young adults of color, which is cause for serious concern.

Although California was not implicated in instances of youth voter suppression that we found in the literature or our data, no state is immune from local partisan politics that could target young adults or specific groups of young adults. State laws that protect voting rights and increase access to voting across all ages and identity groups can counter any local attempts at voter suppression.

### *California Voting Policies*

State-level policies suggest that California is more conducive to youth voting compared to some states, as California was ranked 15th in the country for youth voting rates in 2020<sup>24</sup>. California’s Voters Choice Act (VCA) of 2016<sup>50</sup> modernized elections by mailing every voter a ballot, expanding in-person early voting, giving voters flexibility to cast a ballot at any vote center in their county, and providing secure ballot drop-off locations. Research analyzing voting by mail in the March 2020 primary in Los Angeles County found a 3 percentage point increase in voter turnout for individuals who had not previously requested a mail-in ballot<sup>51</sup>. Analyses of universal vote-by-mail implementation in California, Utah, and Washington showed modest increases in voter turnout and no partisan advance from these increased votes<sup>52</sup>. Although it remains important for counties to consider central placement and ease of access to vote centers, the ability of voters to visit any vote center across a county, along with the guarantee of voting by mail, are policies that help reduce potential threats of suppressing the vote through polling location decisions. Attention to county-level variations in practices is pressing in light of recent local efforts to require ID and implement restrictive voting practices (e.g., City of Huntington Beach)<sup>52</sup>.

Regarding in-person voting, comparing California to other states on election performance indices shows that California does well in some areas and less well in others. In the 2020 election, the average wait time to vote (4.1 minutes) in California was lower than the national average of 11.6 minutes<sup>30</sup>. Yet, California’s voting system may not be fully accessible. People with disabilities in California had a 10% lower voting rate than people without disabilities, a greater disparity than the national average<sup>30</sup>. Research on future election years, as VCA policies become better known to California voters, will be important to assess whether this disparity declines.

Supporting the idea that California’s electoral context is generally more conducive to youth voting, analyses of our nationwide study showed that young Californians were more likely to vote in 2020, less likely to vote in person, and less likely to report procedural barriers to voting than young people in other states<sup>b</sup>. Our study was conducted in the week after the 2020 presidential election and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus, at a time when many states implemented vote-by-mail policies. Findings showed that among young people who voted, more than half (55.4%) of young adults chose not to vote in person, either voting by mail (41.8%) or using a secure ballot box (13.6%). Moreover, of the 44.6% of young adults in our study who voted in person, voting early was nearly twice as popular as voting on election

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<sup>b</sup>Chi-square comparison tests showed that California residents were more likely to vote (90.4%) compared to young people residing in other states (82.0%);  $\chi^2(1,862) = 6.08, p = .014$ . California residents were less likely to vote in-person (16.2%) than non-California residents (51.7%);  $\chi^2(1,720) = 56.79, p < .001$ . California residents were less likely to report procedural barriers to voting (45.2%) than non-California residents (63.0%),  $\chi^2(1,862) = 7.17, p = .007$ .



day (28.0% vs. 16.6%). Some experienced mail-in voting as convenient and efficient, such as the young adult who shared, “I had no real barriers to voting. I was able to vote via mail-in ballot, so I didn’t have to find my local polling station or anything like that.” However, many found mail-in voting to be challenging, an experience that appears tied to how states implement mail-in voting. For example, numerous young adults named applying for a mail-in ballot, getting the ballot signed by a witness, and purchasing stamps as challenges to voting by mail. California’s mail-in voting system avoids these challenges by automatically mailing every registered voter a ballot with pre-paid return postage and no witness signature required. Some groups may particularly benefit from voting by mail. For example, our study found that Asian American young adults were less likely to vote in-person than other young people<sup>c</sup>. Hate crimes against Asian Americans heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>54</sup>, and some Asian American youth may have avoided politicized public environments for fear of discrimination or violence. However, other research has found that voter intimidation can occur with mail-in voting, such as through political messaging that votes are not secure<sup>55</sup>. It is important for California to continue to reduce voter uncertainty regarding voting by mail.

### **Cumulative Costs of Structural Barriers**

A growing body of research considers the cumulative effects of election laws and policies that make registering and voting more arduous<sup>56,57</sup>. The Cost of Voting Index (COVI) looks across 30 state election laws and policies and creates a single index that measures the difficulty of voting in that state<sup>58</sup>. The COVI highlights policies that translate into costs for voters, i.e., additional time, effort, and resources required for individuals to exercise their right to vote. Evidence from the 2012 election showed that voter turnout was lower for young adults in states with higher COVI scores, and thus more restrictive voting laws<sup>59</sup>. Whereas high COVI scores are related to lower voter turnout across age groups, these restrictive voting policies have a larger negative effect on the turnout of young voters<sup>60</sup>. Research using a similar metric to the COVI also showed that restrictive voting laws have a cumulative negative effect on youth voter turnout<sup>61</sup>. Furthermore, the voting rates of Hispanic/Latine young adults were the most negatively affected by COVI: that is, Hispanic/Latine young adults in states with more restrictive voting policies (as indicated by COVI) were less likely to vote compared to Hispanic/Latine young adults in other states and compared to white and Black young adults in the same state<sup>59</sup>.

These findings parallel young adults’ reports of higher costs to voting compared to older adults, which include loss of time, resources, and work opportunity<sup>62</sup>. In our study, some young adults acknowledged that being a first-time voter presented challenges. For instance, one person shared that their biggest barrier was “learning how to vote for the first time,” and another said, “as this was my first time voting in a presidential election, understanding the proper way to fill out and deposit the ballot was just a bit confusing.” Half the young adults in our study (49.8%) indicated that other responsibilities and competing demands on their time were obstacles to voting, the second most common barrier after procedural barriers (59.8%) and health, safety, and COVID-related concerns (54.2%). On average, youth who voted in-person or dropped off their ballot spent about 27 minutes in transit. Those who voted in-person spent about 34 minutes at their polling place, and some waited as long as five hours. As one person described, “My biggest challenge was finding time to go around my work schedule...The expense of going on a Saturday was a long line, so I opted to miss out on about 30 minutes of work to vote in the morning during the week.” We also found that material costs (e.g., financial costs, lost wages, transportation costs)

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<sup>c</sup>A chi-square comparison test showed that Asian young people were less likely to vote in person (31.5%) than youth who were white (52.0%), Black (53.0%), Hispanic/Latine (41.8%), or multiracial/ethnic (53.4%),  $\chi^2(5,722) = 24.44$ ,  $p < .001$ .

were unequally distributed, with Black youth reporting higher costs than white, Hispanic/Latine, and multiracial/ethnic youth<sup>d</sup>, and immigrant youth reporting higher costs than non-immigrant youth<sup>e</sup>.

As of October 2022, California had the 6th lowest COVI score nationally, meaning that the state has a policy climate with lower costs and greater ease of voting compared to most other states<sup>63</sup>. Table 1 summarizes strengths and weaknesses in California's voting policies, using the COVI and some indicators from the Ease of Voting Index<sup>64</sup> and the Youth Democracy Score<sup>57</sup>, other summative measures of state-level election policy contexts that assess state-level ease of voting. California has already implemented a large majority of the benchmark policies. Two notable exceptions are particularly relevant to young voters.

First, 20 states allow 17-year-olds to vote in primary elections if they turn 18 before the general election, but California is not among them. California lawmakers have failed to advance this measure multiple times<sup>65</sup>, and California voters recently rejected the measure when Proposition 18 was defeated in the 2020 general election, with 56.4% of voters in opposition<sup>66</sup>. Implementation of this policy requires a constitutional amendment in California. This policy aims to encourage more electoral participation among young people by allowing them to participate in nominating candidates before casting their first votes<sup>32</sup>. To our knowledge, the impacts of age 17 primary voting on youth voter turnout have not been researched. However, arguments in favor of this policy point to research that earlier electoral participation establishes life-long voting habits. Supporters also argue that primary voting at age 17 would pair meaningfully with high school civics courses and allow young people to begin voting when they are still connected to school and community<sup>65</sup>. These arguments dovetail with a growing body of scholarship arguing that the voting age should be lowered to 16<sup>16,67,68,69</sup>. Based on developmental research on young people's political capacities and motivations and on international research demonstrating benefits of youth voting on political knowledge, interest, and participation, scholars argue that expanding voting rights to people at younger ages would foster greater political engagement. The policy has so far been adopted only for local voting in certain U.S. localities, including 7 towns in Maine, one in Vermont, one in New Jersey (Newark), and two in California (Oakland and Berkeley). Allowing 17-year-olds to vote in primaries is a modest, logical step toward encouraging young people to get involved early in electoral participation. Lowering the voting age for national elections would be a bolder move that would establish California as a national leader in strengthening democratic rights for young people, building on the state's legacy of innovation and setting a precedent for other states to follow. Lowering the voting age to 17 in California has been proposed several times<sup>65</sup>, most recently in 2023 through Senate Constitutional Amendment 2<sup>70</sup>, but has never made it to the ballot.

Second, more than a quarter of Americans live in states with automatic voter registration (AVR)<sup>70</sup>, but California's AVR policies are limited. Specifically, California limits AVR to specific transactions with the DMV and requires active responding to registration questions. Prospective voters who do not interact with the DMV must opt-in to voter registration. Nine states have secure AVR, in which citizens are registered to vote automatically and without additional action unless they wish to opt-out. Some states have also integrated secure AVR into multiple state services, such as Medicare and state health insurance exchange platforms<sup>72,73</sup>. Research shows that AVR may especially benefit young adults, who may gravitate to more convenient registration systems, and people of color<sup>28</sup>. The registration rate through California's DMV has increased 21-fold since the implementation of AVR to become the primary method

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<sup>d</sup>A one-way ANOVA with Tukey HSD post-hoc tests ( $F = 3.15, p = .008$ ) showed that the average material costs of Black youth ( $M = 1.69$ , on a 1 to 5 scale, from "not at all costly" to "extremely costly") were higher than the average costs of white youth ( $M = 1.46; p = .034$ ), Hispanic/Latine youth ( $M = 1.45; p = .046$ ), and multiracial/ethnic youth ( $M = 1.35; p = .029$ ), but not for Asian youth ( $M = 1.53; p = .255$ ).

<sup>e</sup>The results of a  $t$ -test indicated that youth born outside of the U.S. ( $M = 1.50$ ) reported higher costs than youth born in the U.S. ( $M = 2.16; t = -2.85, df = 24.7, p = .009$ ).

of new voter registration<sup>74</sup>. Although other California state agencies have been designated as voter registration agencies (e.g., CalFresh and Medi-Cal), they accounted for less than 1% of registrants for the 2022 general election<sup>74</sup>, likely because they do not employ AVR methods. A policy proposed in 2023<sup>75</sup> would move California to secure AVR. This bill provides a foundation for expanding the integration of AVR systems beyond the DMV and to other institutions designated by the Secretary of State. Many young people appear to be opting out of California’s current AVR set-up, due to the additional prompts and questions required while they are attempting to get a driver’s license or State ID<sup>76</sup>, an issue that would be addressed through a secure AVR system. The Institute for Responsive Government estimates that secure AVR would save California over \$9 million each election cycle by eliminating paper registration cards, reducing undeliverable mail, and reducing same-day registration and provisional ballots<sup>77</sup>.

## **Policy Recommendations for California**

Young people face numerous structural barriers to registering and voting that can be addressed through policy intervention. To move young people from barriers to ballots and ensure that all young Californians have easy access to exercising their right to vote and to meaningfully participating in electoral politics, we offer several evidence-based policy recommendations:

### *Maintain Promotive Policies*

California has numerous laws that promote ease of access to registering and voting, especially through the Voter’s Choice Act of 2016. Evidence demonstrates the benefits of many of California’s voting policies for encouraging registration and voting for young adults. At a minimum, California must commit to maintaining these promotive efforts. In a national context where voting rights are being curtailed<sup>78</sup> and young adults’ voting rights are being actively suppressed in some areas<sup>19</sup>, maintaining policies like same-day registration, all mail voting, flexible vote centers, and pre-registration create an electoral context that benefits young people.

### *Complete the Ease of Voting Scorecard*

California has room for growth in implementing policies that ease the costs of voting. As shown in Table 1, California has several remaining boxes to check to maximize ease of voting. Nine policies adopted by other states, but not yet by California, have been shown to reduce barriers to voting. We did not review the evidence and rationale for each policy, but our Table 1 summary of policies backed by research provides a roadmap for California to “complete its scorecard” and further reduce the barriers to voting for Californians. We highly recommend the implementation of two policies that have promise for reducing barriers to youth voting, as described above:

- Allowing 17-year-olds to vote in primaries who turn 18 by election day.
- Implement secure AVR procedures at all voter registration agencies.

### *Designate High Schools as Voter Registration Agencies*

Given California’s low pre-registration rates for 16- and 17-year-olds, additional policy intervention is needed to maximize the benefits of this policy for growing young voters in the state. A logical next step would be designating California high schools as official voter registration agencies. High schools are greatly undervalued sites for voter registration. Designated voter registration agencies, according to the Secretary of State, “must offer each person who comes into contact with the agency the opportunity to register to vote<sup>79</sup>”. School enrollment requires identification and residency documents that also satisfy voter registration requirements<sup>80</sup>. California already recognizes high schools as valuable sites for preparing young people to vote by allowing voter registration in high schools and establishing voter registration weeks<sup>41</sup>, but these efforts clearly do not go far enough, as less than 13% of eligible 16- and 17-year-olds are pre-registered<sup>36</sup>. Designating schools as official voter registration agencies would more firmly establish schools as partners in the voter registration process and would strengthen the infrastructure needed to better implement the state’s pre-registration policy. Moreover, given research

demonstrating boosts in registration rates from secure AVR (i.e., opt-out policies<sup>75</sup>), establishing AVR in high schools would allow California to act on a commitment to bringing young voters to the ballot box<sup>81</sup>. We view Senate Bill 299 as promising legislation to support secure AVR at all voter registration agencies, and further recommend that schools be officially designated as voter registration sites in this legislation.

#### *Fund High Schools to Register Young Voters*

For high schools to adequately invest in voter registration efforts, whether they are implementing automated or opt-in approaches, state funding is needed. This need for funding is recognized by current Assembly Bill 2627<sup>82</sup>, which would establish a Civic Learning, Outreach, and Engagement Fund. Schools would apply for these funds to support the integration of voter registration and pre-registration efforts with other civic education and engagement initiatives. We view AB 2627 as promising legislation and would recommend a larger initiative to give funds to *all* high schools with a mandate to establish voter registration procedures. Integrating voter registration within the context of deeper conversations in civics courses and activities is important for strengthening young people's knowledge and confidence to reduce fear and counter potential intimidation or discrimination.

#### **Conclusion**

Young people have a constitutional right to vote at 18, yet face significant barriers to registering and voting that have been directly linked to state-level policies and practices. The 26th amendment to the Constitution states that the right to vote cannot be *denied or abridged* due to age. Based on this language, according to legal scholars, state laws that disproportionately affect young people's voting rates can be challenged as unconstitutional<sup>83</sup>. Given research documenting policy-level barriers to voting for young people, it is incumbent on California to proactively address age disparities in registration and voting by reducing known barriers and implementing evidence-based policies that enhance youth voting.

**Table 1. California's Voting Policy Strengths and Weaknesses**

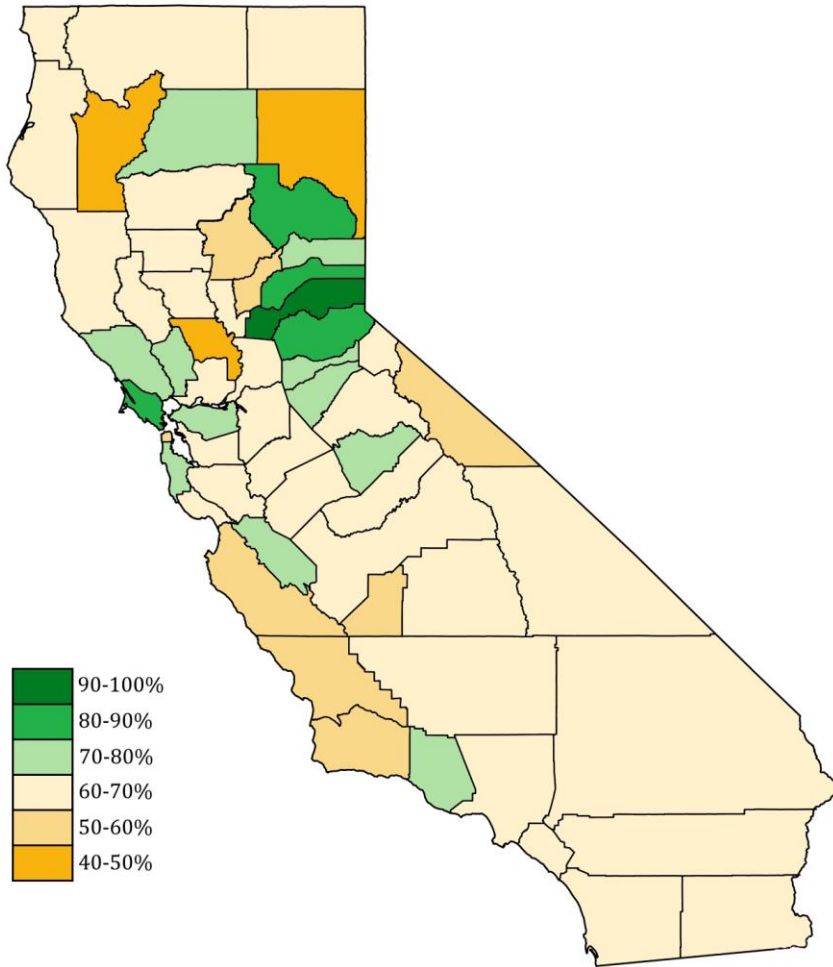
		States that have more favorable policies
<b>Voter registration restrictions</b>		
Same day registration allowed	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
No mental competency requirement to register	<input type="checkbox"/>	CO, ID, IL, IN, KS, MI, NC, NH, PA, VT
Online voter registration supported	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Felons allowed to register while incarcerated	<input type="checkbox"/>	ME, VT
Felons allowed to register after incarceration	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Voter rolls are not purged solely due to inactivity*	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Registration drive restrictions</b>		
Registration drives allowed without state certification or training	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Registration drives allowed without reporting burden	<input type="checkbox"/>	AK, AL, AR, AZ, CT, GA, HI, IA, ID, IL, IN, MA, ME, MI, MN, MS, MT, NC, ND, NH, NJ, NY, OH, OK, OR, PA, RI, SC, SD, TN, TX, UT, VA, VT, WA, WY
<b>Pre-registration laws</b>		
16-year-olds allowed to pre-register	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Allow primary voting for youth who will turn 18 before general election^	<input type="checkbox"/>	CT, DE, IA, IL, IN, KT, MD, ME, MS, NC, NE, NJ, NM, NV, OH, SC, UT, VT, VA, WV
<b>Automatic voter registration</b>		
Automatic voter registration available at the DMV	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Automatic voter registration available at other state agencies	<input type="checkbox"/>	AK, CO, DE, IL, MA, MD, ME, ND, NJ, OR, RI, VT, WA
Back-end automatic voter registration	<input type="checkbox"/>	AK, CO, DE, MA, ND, OR
<b>Voting procedures</b>		
Early voting	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Time off from work with pay for voting	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
State holiday for Election Day	<input type="checkbox"/>	DE, HI, IL, IN, KY, LA, MD, MI, MT, NJ, NY, RI, VA, WV
Historically consistent number of polling stations	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Reasonable wait time	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Food and drink allowed in polling places	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
All mail voting	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Postage paid for ballots	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Voter ID laws</b>		
No ID required to cast a ballot	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Student IDs can be used^	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Poll hours</b>		
Minimum poll hours	<input type="checkbox"/>	CT, IA, LA, NJ, NY, OR, WA
Youth poll workers allowed^	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Absentee voting restrictions</b>		
Excuse not required for absentee voting	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
In-person absentee voting allowed	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Permanent absentee voting supported	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Ballot dropoff available	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Copy of ID not required with absentee ballot	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Online absentee application available	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Unrestricted 3rd party absentee ballot collection	<input type="checkbox"/>	AK, DE, HI, ID, ME, MS, ND, NE, NY, OR, RI, TN, UT, VT, WA, WV, WY
<b>Ballot tracking and curing</b>		
Ballot verification and tracking*	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Cure process for vote by mail errors*	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

Note. Policy evaluation is based on 2022 data. Unless otherwise indicated, categories were included in the Cost of Voting Index<sup>63</sup>.

\* Included in the Ease of Voting Index<sup>64</sup>, but not the other inventories.

^ Included in the Youth Democracy Score<sup>57</sup>, but not the other inventories.

Figure 1. Youth Voter Registration Rates by County



This figure shows the proportion of youth who were registered in 2020, prior to the presidential election. Population data come from 2020 Census data<sup>84</sup> and includes all residents (ages 18-25), not limited to citizens or eligible voters. Registration data is from the California Secretary of State's October 19th, 2020 Report of Registration<sup>85</sup>. Estimates for sparsely populated counties (<1,000 youth) may have error margins that exceed 10%. Because the Census and Registration data were collected by different agencies, each type of data may have been collected at different points during the year.

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## Appendix A

### Literature Review Methodology

We conducted a rapid review of the literature, aligned with guidelines recommended by the World Health Organization<sup>86</sup>. Rapid reviews differ from systematic reviews in that they are narrower in scope and not comprehensive, are summarized narratively and not statistically, and thus are able to be conducted over a shorter time frame<sup>87</sup>. We followed a series of steps described below:

#### Step 1: Question Formulation

We sought to answer two research questions through our review:

- (1) What structural barriers to voting do young people face?
- (2) How can structural barriers to voting be reduced for young people?

We defined *structural barriers* as obstacles to voting built into electoral laws and procedures that disproportionately affect young people

#### Step 2: Protocol Development

We reviewed literature to collect articles that centered on the population of young people (ages 18-30, with a focus on younger ages) and explicitly focused on structural barriers to voting and policies to reduce those barriers. We also used the following inclusion criteria: (1) published in 2010 or later and (2) peer-reviewed articles and institutional white papers.

#### Step 3: Data Identification

We used Google Scholar to identify relevant literature. In January and February 2024, two research assistants used 15 different search terms related to barriers to youth voting. All of the terms used Boolean operators to include words “youth,” “voting,” and “United States”, with each the following modifiers in separate searches: barriers, voter suppression, costs, disenfranchisement, transportation, ID laws, and gerrymandering, policies, voting by mail, registration, mobile/mobilization, civic education, influence, zip code, and residency. The initial search process yielded 288 papers. After duplicates were removed, 241 papers remained. We then removed 60 papers published before 2010, yielded 181 papers to be screened.

#### Step 4: Data Screening

We next screened all paper abstracts for relevance to our research question removing any that lacked focus on youth voting barriers. At this stage, we also removed seven unpublished student papers to maintain more rigor in the analysis.

The first stage of screening resulted in 82 eligible papers. The second stage of screening consisted of the research team dividing up and reading the full papers for relevance and insights. Data were collected on the population/sample, voting barriers discussed, key findings regarding voting barriers, policies discussed to reduce barriers, key findings regarding policies to reduce barriers, and other miscellaneous notes. At this stage, 12 additional papers were excluded due to lack of relevance to the research question. The number of total papers considered in the narrative review was 70.

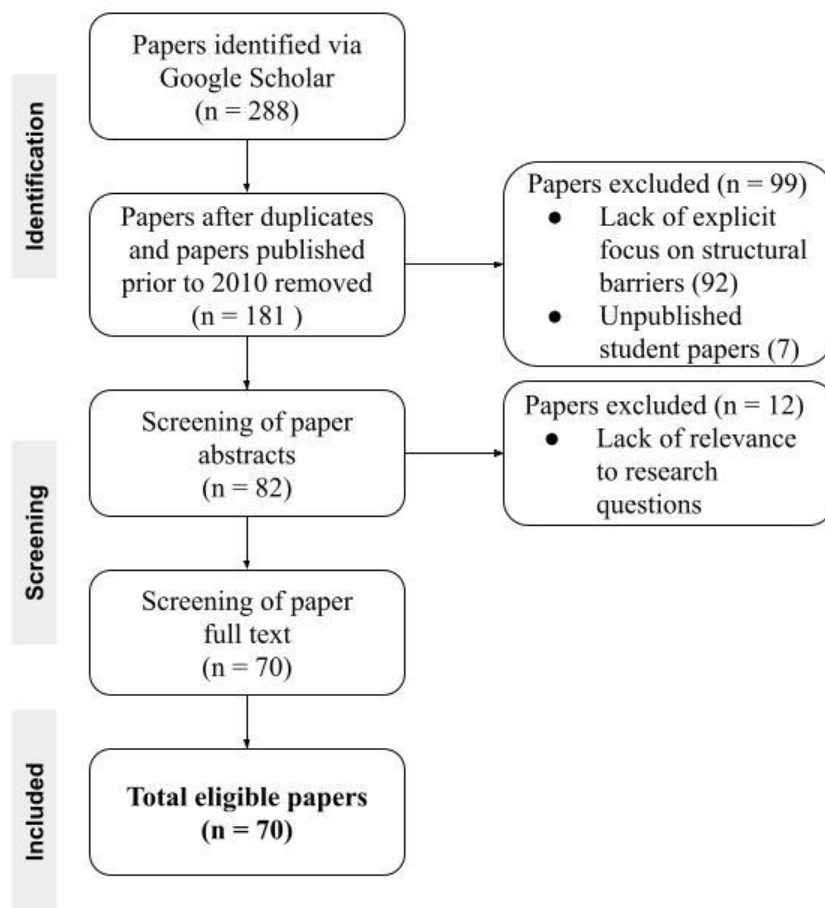
In our final collection, seven scholars were lead authors on two manuscripts and one author was a lead author of three manuscripts.

Our process is illustrated in Figure A1.

### Step 5: Knowledge Synthesis

In the final step, the lead author analyzed the reviewer notes on each article, and reread articles as needed to write the narrative summary of the review, which was organized around barriers to registration, voting, and cumulative costs.

Figure A1. Literature review flow diagram



## Appendix B

### Survey Methodology

We conducted an empirical analysis of data we collected from youth in the week following the 2020 election, between November 4th - 11th, 2020. Our nationwide sample consisted of 866 young people (ages 18-25) recruited through the Prolific research platform. Participants completed a 30-minute survey that included a range of open-ended and closed-ended questions about their experiences of barriers to voting. We intentionally administered our survey to racially and ethnically diverse youth (Black, 23.7%; Hispanic/Latine, 18.9%; Asian, 26.3%; White, 23.0%). About a fifth (18.2%) were California residents. Our unique data allow us to examine young people's experiences of voting barriers and how they may differ based on race/ethnicity or experiences of marginalization. A detailed demographic description of the sample is presented below in Table B1. We conducted three sets of analyses: (1) Examined patterns in participants' open-ended responses, which illuminated their experiences of voting barriers, (2) Conducted statistical tests that clarified demographic differences in the burden of voting barriers, and (3) Estimated statistical models that highlighted the key factors that contributed to cumulative costs of voting barriers that young people experienced. A small subset of analyses were chosen for the final report, based on alignment with the main themes identified in the literature review.

Participants responded to two open-ended questions: "Regardless of whether you are registered to vote, what were your biggest barriers or challenges to registering to vote?" and "Regardless of whether you voted or not, what were your biggest barriers or challenges to voting?" After establishing a codebook based on reviewing responses to both questions, two coders independently coded the same 90 responses for barriers to registration, and achieved reliability ( $\kappa = .71$ ). Discrepancies were discussed and reconciled, and then the same coders independently coded the same 90 responses for barriers to voting, and achieved higher reliability ( $\kappa = .86$ ). After achieving reliability, one coder applied codes to the full set of responses. These codes were then spot-checked by the second coder.

The codes are listed in Table B2. The primary barriers to registering and voting were: Lack of procedural knowledge, Lack of political knowledge, Political alienation, Health and safety concerns, Competing demands and other priorities, and Procedural barriers. We also asked a wide range of closed-ended questions that assessed specific barriers, which fit into these same categories. (All survey items and descriptive statistics the items are publicly available here: <https://voting-study-codebook.netlify.app/>) Analyses on voting barriers combined any instance of reporting the barrier from closed and open-ended items, whereas the survey only asked the open-ended item about registration barriers.

Our study had four notable limitations. First, our sample was not nationally representative of the general population of young people. For example, 90.5% of the sample registered and 83.4% voted. Thus, our study likely underrepresents the structural barriers young people face by not including more non-voters. Youth who participate in Prolific surveys may be more fluent at navigating institutional platforms and obstacles than youth who do not. We did not use weighting or propensity scores to approximate the national population. Second, the 2020 election was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which presented unique challenges that may not be representative of modern elections. Third, although our sample was diverse geographically, it was not nationally-representative. Fourth, given that the election is inherently politicized, participants' perceptions and recollections of barriers to voting might be influenced by the outcome of the election, media narratives, or post-election discussions. For instance, 2020 witnessed unprecedented challenges to the integrity of the electoral process, both before and after the election, which may have shaped some participants' responses.

Table B1.

*Sample Characteristics*

	Full sample <i>N (%) / M (SD)</i>
Age	21.61(2.22)
California resident	157(18.2%)
Race/ethnicity	
White	199(23.0%)
Black or African American	205(23.7%)
Hispanic or Latine	164(18.9%)
Asian American	149(26.3%)
More than one race/ethnicity	68(7.9%)
Other	2(0.2%)
Gender	
Female	451(52.1%)
Male	386(44.6%)
Nonbinary	29(3.4%)
Sexual orientation	
Hetero	588(67.9%)
Non-Hetero	278(32.1%)
Education level	
College degree	314(36.4%)
No college degree	549(63.6%)
Parent education level	
Either parent has a college degree	472(55.5%)
Neither parent has a college degree	549(63.6%)
Political party	
Democrats	492(59.6%)
Republicans	91(11.0%)
Others	243(29.4%)
Born in the US	839(97.1%)
Both parents born in the US	419(48.4%)
Reported a disability	145(17.7%)
Voted	722(83.4%)
Registered	784(90.5%)
<i>N</i>	866

*Note.* Number and percent are shown for categorical variables, whereas mean and standard deviation are shown for continuous variables. The table represents un-imputed data and some variables may contain missing values.

Table B2

*Reported Barriers to Registration and Voting*

Category	Examples	Registration, open- ended only	Voting, open- ended only	Voting, open and closed items
		<i>N</i> (%)	<i>N</i> (%)	<i>N</i> (%)
Procedural barriers	Did not request or receive absentee ballot in time, did not have transportation to the polls	298 (34.4%)	298 (34.4%)	518 (59.8%)
Health and safety concerns	Voting felt physically unsafe, family member at risk for COVID-19	79 (9.1%)	135 (15.6%)	469 (54.2%)
Competing demands and other priorities	Work, school, or family commitments	79 (9.1%)	69 (8.0%)	431 (49.8%)
Political alienation	Not interested in voting, didn't think vote would matter	32 (3.7%)	75 (8.7%)	390 (45.0%)
Lack of procedural knowledge	Unable to find polling place, couldn't figure out how to vote	90 (10.4%)	78 (9.0%)	247 (28.5%)
Lack of political knowledge	Not informed about candidates or issues	20 (2.3%)	59 (6.8%)	197 (22.7%)
Unexpected constraints	Inclement weather	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	29 (3.3%)
Other		17 (2.0%)	26 (3.0%)	131 (15.1%)
No barriers		0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
<i>N</i>		866	866	866

*Note:* All participants were asked open and closed-ended items, regardless of their registration and voting status. Closed-ended items were only asked about voting, not registration.