CENTER FOR REGIONAL CHANGE

The California Civic Engagement Project

ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION: IMPACT ON CALIFORNIA'S 2012 ELECTION TURNOUT, BY AGE AND PARTY AFFILIATION

In Brief:

- Online registration contributed to the size of the general electorate for the November 2012 election.

- Online registrants turned out to vote at significantly higher levels than non-online registrants - 78% versus 70.2%.

- The gap in party turnout was much smaller for online registrants.

- Younger online registrants voted at rates close to those of the rest of the electorate.

The implementation of California's online voter registration system has raised expectations for the potential changes new online registrants would bring to the state's electorate. Instituted only a little over a month before the close of registration for the 2012 general election, large numbers of Californians registered online, making up 4% of the state's current registered electorate.[1] Despite its initial success, some analysts questioned whether online registration would actually create more voters— whether online registrants would actually turnout to vote. Utilizing California's voter records, we examined the following key questions surrounding the impact of online voter registration on the 2012 November election.[2]

1. Did the turnout of online registrants differ from the rest of the 2012 electorate?
2. What impact did online voter registration have on the make-up of the state's registered electorate?
3. Did the vote of online registrants differ politically from the rest of the 2012 electorate?

2012 California Online Registered Voter Turnout by Age — General Election
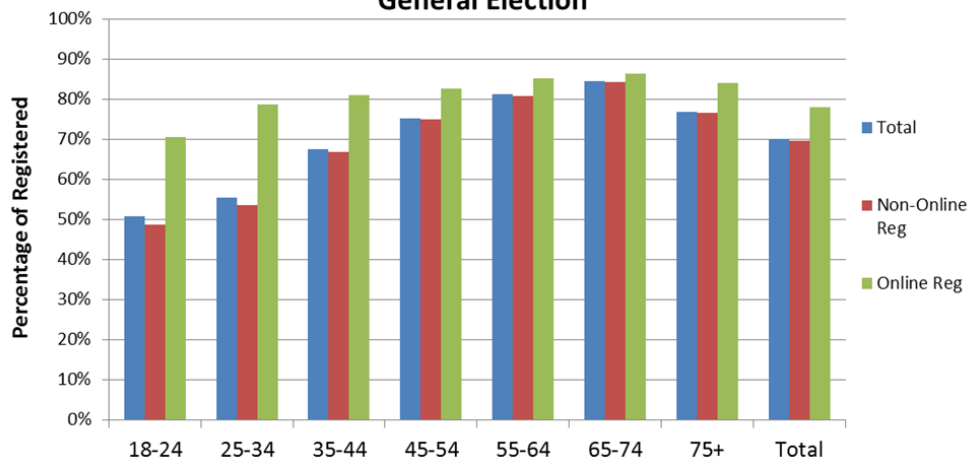
Data Source: California Secretary of State, 2012
UC Davis Center for Regional Change - CCEP

### 1: Did the turnout of online registrants differ from the rest of 2012 electorate?

- *Online registrants turned out to vote at higher levels than non-online registrants - 78% versus 70.2%.*

- *Of all age groups, younger adults have the largest difference in turnout between those who registered online and those that didn't.*

California's registered voter turnout was the lowest for a general presidential election since 2000. However, voter turnout of those who registered online added to the state's overall registered turnout rate in 2012.[3] Online registrant turnout was 8 percentage points higher than voters who registered using other methods.[4] This difference in turnout by registration method was much larger for younger voters. Seventy percent of 18-24 year-olds that registered online turned out to vote—25 percentage points higher than those ages 18-24 that did not register online. For ages 25 to 34, 78% of those who registered online actually voted—22 percentage points higher than non-online registrants of the same age group. These turnout rates mean there is a much smaller age gap in voter turnout for online registrants compared to the large age difference in turnout for non-online registrants.

Youth (age 18-24) comprised 30% of all online registrants in the state. While youth were only 8.1 % of all November 2012 voters, they were 26.4% of voters who registered online. Twenty-five to 34 years-olds were 13.6% of all voters, while 31.7% of voters who registered online. Given these numbers, online registration may provide another pathway to increasing youth influence on the political make-up of the electorate.

Because the last open month of registration occurred during a time of heightened interest in the election, we might expect online registrants, overall, to exhibit somewhat higher turnout due to the time period in which they registered. However, when comparing online registrants to only those non-online registrants who registered after September 19th (online registration's implementation date), we still see a large turnout difference between online and non-online registrants—turnout of non-online registrants after September 19th was 70.6%, compared to the 78% for online registrants.

2: What impact did online voter registration have on the make-up of the state's registered electorate in 2012?
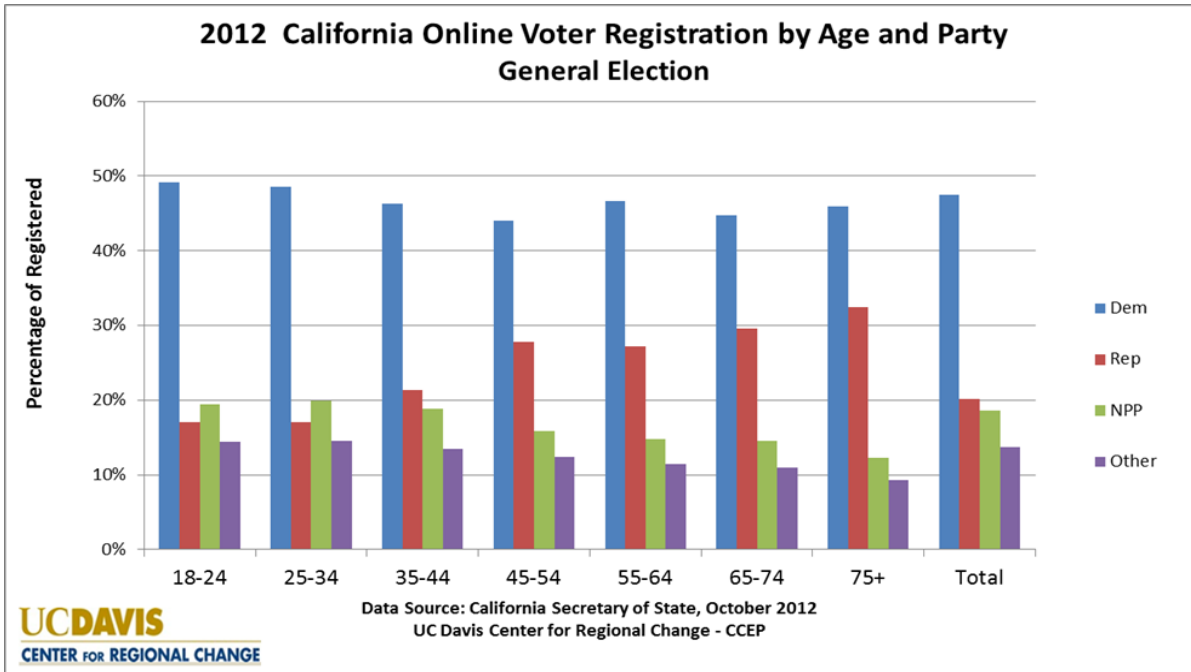

- *Youth are driving the differences in the party affiliation for online registrants.*

- *The gap between Democratic and Republican party registration is significantly larger for youth who registered online.*

Total voter registration for the 2012 November election was 43.5% Democratic, 29.6% Republican and 21% No Party Preference (NPP).[5] In contrast, general online registrants (all ages) were more Democratic at 47.5%, and significantly less Republican at 18.6% - a 27.5 percentage point gap between the state's major parties. There also were slightly fewer NPP registrants and a higher percentage of "Other" political party identifications among online registrants versus those who did not register online.[6]

The variation in party identification widens significantly for online registrants below age 45. For instance, the gap between youth (age 18-24) Democratic and Republican party online registration is significantly larger than for youth who didn't register online. Online youth registered 49.1% Democratic and 17.1% Republican— a 32 percentage point gap, where as non-online youth registrants were 38% Democratic and 22% Republican. NPP registration was also much lower for youth that registered online than non-online youth reg-

Before the election, many analysts wondered whether online registration would actually create more voters. Would online registrants actually turn out to vote? They not only turned out in big ways—they looked very different from the rest of the electorate in terms of age and party.

3: Did the vote of online registrants differ politically from the rest of the 2012 electorate?
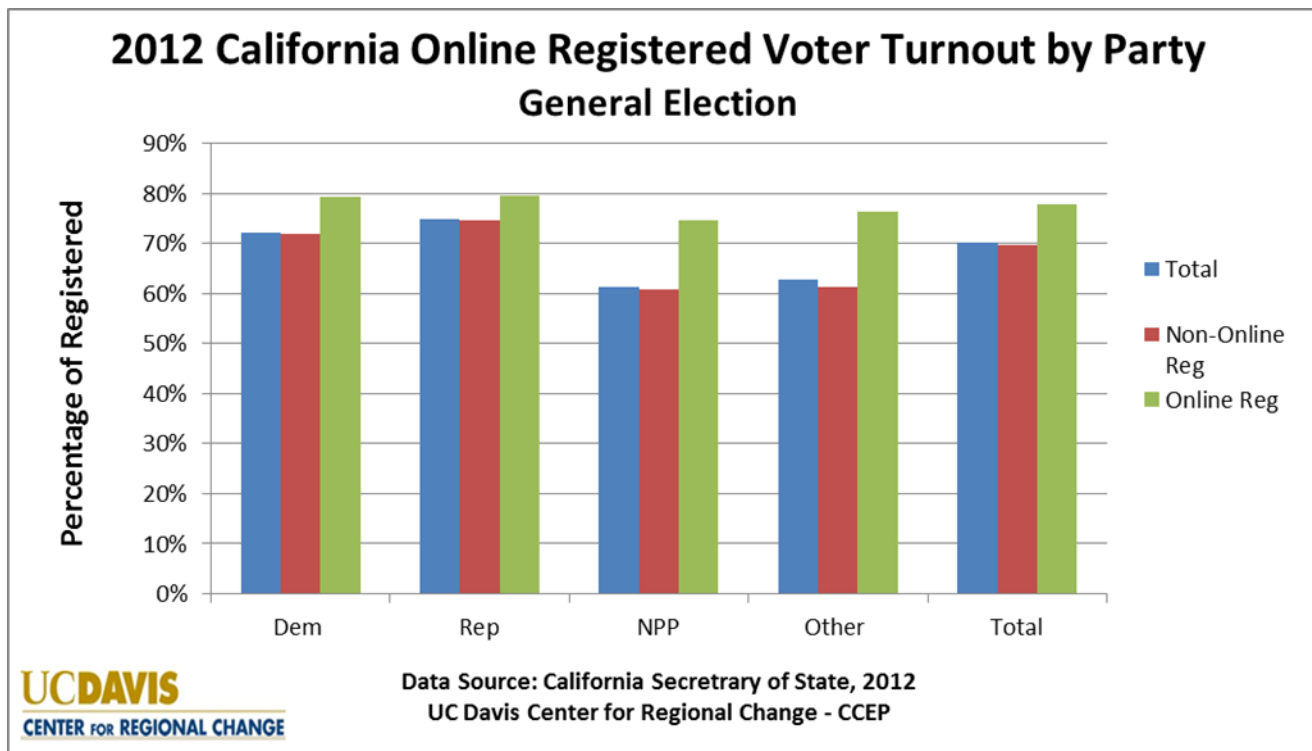
- *Voter turnout of online registrants varied significantly less by party affiliation than for non-online registrants.*

- *NPP and "other" party registrants turned out at much higher rates than non-online registrants with the same affiliation.*

While voter turnout of online registrants was higher than the rest of the electorate for every age group, it was also higher by each type of party affiliation. For the general electorate, turnout of registered Republicans was 74.9%, Democrats at 72.1% and turnout of NPP registrants was 61.2% Turnout of Democrats and Republicans that registered online was much higher at 79.2% and 79.4%, respectively. Turnout of online NPP registrants was 74.5%. Interestingly, at 76.2%, turnout was also much higher for other party registrants who utilized online versus another registration method.

There was a much smaller difference in turnout rates across parties for online registrants versus the general electorate. Online registrants who affiliated as Democratic and Republican turned out at essentially the same rates, where as this was not the case for non-online registrants. At 74.5 %, turnout of online NPP registrants was only 5 percentage points lower than online registrants who registered as a major party. In contrast, voter turnout of non-online NPP registrants was much lower than non-online registrants affiliated with the major parties (14 percentage points lower than non-online registered Republicans and 11 percentage points lower than non-online registered Democrats).

Online Voter Registration: Differing Impacts Across California

The impact of online registration is not spread evenly across California. The percent of voters who are currently utilizing the online voter registration system varies greatly by county. As of January 2013, online registrants were 4 percent of all registered voters in the state. By county, the percent of registered voters that registered online runs from less than 1% (Mendocino) to more than 6% (San Francisco).

Voter turnout rates for online registrants also vary across the state's counties. While reasons for these variations are still being examined, we know that disparate use of online registration by counties, at least for the 2012 election, translates into differing impacts on the age and party make-up of counties' overall voting electorate.

In the November election, counties with higher percentages of online registrants, generally gained a larger bump in their overall registered voter turnout rates (even when their turnout still remained lower than 2008), for all party affiliations. These counties also saw larger percentages of youth participation, with young online registrants helping to narrow the participation gap youth have with the rest of the electorate.

2012 Voter Turnout: Online Registrants
General Election
State of California

Percent of online registered voters who voted, by county (Quintiles)

- 23.8% - 75.6%
- 75.7% - 77.2%
- 77.3% - 80.0%
- 80.1% - 82.2%
- 82.3% - 89.0%

Statewide Turnout: Online Registrants - 78%
Data Source: California Secretary of State – January, 2013.
Online registration data was not fully reported for the following counties: De Norte, Imperial, Nevada,Siskiyou, Trinity, and Yolo.
Map Created by Allison Ferrini, January 2013

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These findings are significant because, once implemented, online quickly became the dominant method chosen for registration in California for the November general election (versus non-online methods) — over half of all new general registrants, as well as over half of new youth registrants (age 18-24) chose to register via this method after its official implementation on September 19, 2012. [7] As online registration becomes the predominant voter registration method in the state, it will be important to track variation in the use of this method by age and party, as well as by race and ethnicity. While these data indicate that online registration has been very successful in increasing access to our state's electoral system, it is too early to tell whether differences in party registration and turnout for online registrants (versus other methods) will continue. Answering this question will be important in identifying future changes in the composition of California's overall voting electorate.
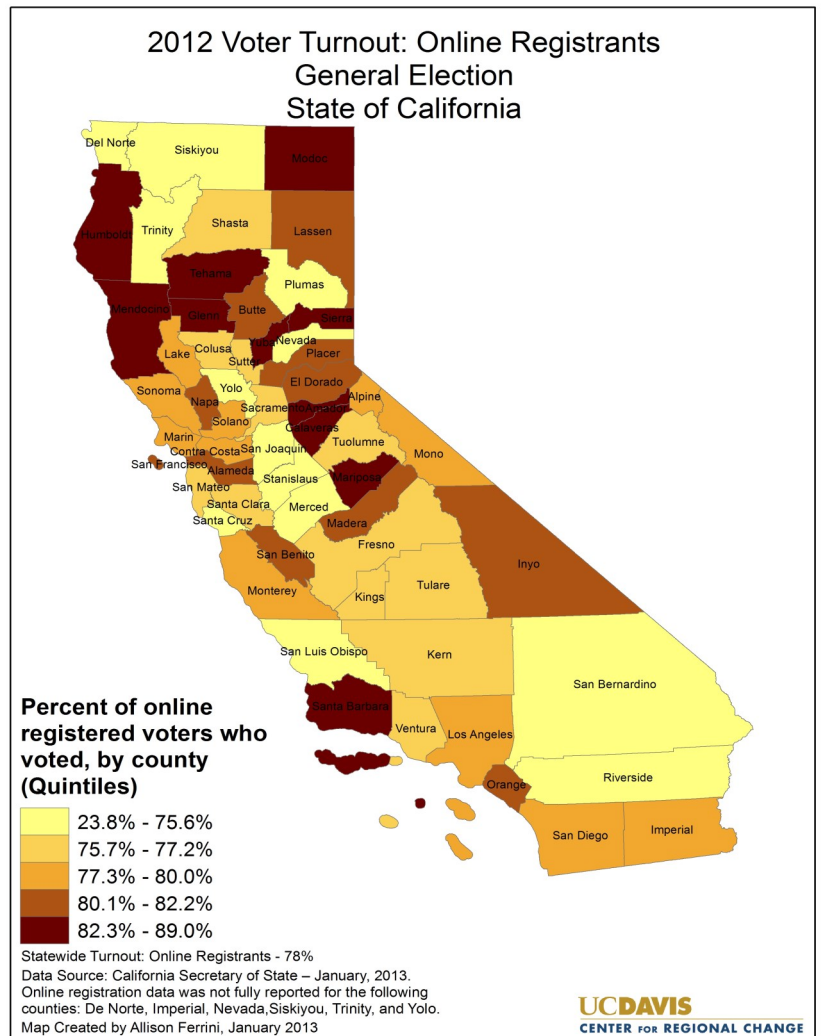
NEXT BRIEF:

California's 2012 Youth Voter Turnout: Disparate Growth and Remaining Challenges

Notes

[1]California Senate Bill 397, effective Jan. 1, authorized creation of an online registration system which was implemented on September 19, 2012. The system allows the entire registration process to occur electronically and be verified against CA Department of Motor Vehicle records.

[2] Detailed registration records and voting records were acquired from the California Secretary of State's Office (Cal SOS) and aggregated to the county and state level. These data are the actual voter records and not representative samples. Because of this, the level of confidence in the data is not susceptible to estimates as are survey or exit poll results. 2012 Registration data for the close of registration (Oct 22, 2012) was collected by the Cal SOS office as of October 26. Alameda, Del Norte, El Dorado, Glenn, Monterey, San Luis Obispo, Santa Cruz, Siskiyou, Solano, Stanislaus, Trinity, Tuolumne, and Yolo Counties did not report their close of registration data by this date. Close of registration data presented in this brief for these counties reflects their 60 day close of registration report (September 2012). November 2012 election voter data was collected by the CalSOS office as of January 11, 2013. Online voter data was not fully reported by the following counties: De Norte, Imperial, Nevada, Siskiyou, Trinity, and Yolo.

[3] Note that some of the individuals who registered online might still have registered anyway by another method. This could mean that we might see more online registration in terms of absolute numbers, yet the overall registration and turnout rates could have been the same even without the new availability of an online method.

[4]California registration methods include: DMV, fax (military and overseas voters), in person, mail (must have a postmark), registration drive, other social service agencies, unknown or Secretary of State, and online via the SOS website.

[5]No Party Preference (NPP) includes all registrants identified in California Secretary of State's registration records as decline to state or no party preference.

[6]"Other party" includes all registrants identified in California Secretary of State's registration records as any of the following party affiliations: American Independent Party, American Elect Party, Green Party, Libertarian Party, Peace and Freedom Party and Other.

[7] See California Civic Engagement Project, Policy Brief: Issue Two - California's Youth Vote: Strength and Potential for an analysis of California's youth voter registration in the 2002-2010 November elections.
http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/projects/ccep-policy-briefs/UCDavis_CCEP_Policy_Brief_2_Youth_For_Release.pdf.

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