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CENTER FOR INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY

The Experience of Black Voters in California: 2020 General Election and Beyond

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About the Center for Inclusive Democracy (CID)

The Center for Inclusive Democracy (CID), formerly known as the California Civic Engagement Project, is part of the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy and is based in Sacramento. CID conducts a range of national and multi-state research initiatives exploring voting behavior, civic engagement, electoral and economic research, the intersection of social justice and democracy, and more. Its non-partisan research informs and empowers a wide range of policy and organizing efforts aimed at eliminating disparities in social and economic wellbeing. To learn more about CID's research, visit: cid.usc.edu.

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Executive Summary

A record-breaking 17 million ballots were cast in the California 2020 general election. With a competitive presidential election, universal vote-by-mail ballot access, and increased mobilization efforts in many communities, the state saw historically high voter turnout, including greater participation from voters of color. While turnout was high in California, it is important to examine how the voting experiences of groups, historically underrepresented at the ballot box, may have differed in the state.

For this report, part of a research series, CID focuses analysis on the participation of Black voters in the California 2020 general election, their experiences engaging with the electoral system, and their preferences for future elections.

This report addresses the following four research questions:

1. What are the turnout characteristics of Black communities in California?
2. What methods of voting did Black communities use in the 2020 general election?
3. What are the sources of election information for Black voters and what are their preferences for how they cast their ballots?
4. What are the opportunities for the engagement of Black voters in California?

Communities are typically defined by variables difficult to measure, such as shared identities, common objectives, and shared interests, which do not obey traditional geographic limitations. For the purpose of this report, Black communities in California are measured as either Black majority census tracts (where 50.0% or more of the residents are Black) or Black plurality census tracts (where the share of the residents that are Black is higher than any other racial and ethnic group, including Black majority census tracts). By looking at both Black majority and Black plurality census tracts, this analysis is able to observe turnout trends and the electoral influence of communities where Black eligible voters are a numerically large proportion of the population.

Turnout Characteristics of Black Communities in California

The Turnout Gap Between Black and White, non-Latino Voters has been Widening

In the 2020 general election, 64.0% of Black eligible voters cast a ballot according to the Current Population Survey (CPS). With 74.5% of white, non-Latino eligible voters casting a ballot, there was a 10.5 percentage point turnout gap between Black and white, non-Latino eligible voters. This turnout gap has increased in recent general elections. In the 2004 general election, for example, the turnout gap between Black (66.2%) and white, non-Latino (70.6%) eligible voters was 4.4 percentage points.

Over Three-Quarters of Eligible Black Voters in Black Majority Census Tracts Cast a Ballot

In census tracts with majority Black residents (50.0% or higher), the Black eligible voter turnout rate was 75.2% in the 2020 general election. Out of 96,353 eligible Black voters in Black majority census tracts, 72,453 cast a ballot. This turnout rate is higher than the total eligible voter turnout (67.6%) for California overall (all census tracts combined).

Black Majority Census Tracts Generally had Lower Total Eligible Voter Turnout when Compared to White, non-Latino Majority Census Tracts

Of California's 9,129 census tracts, CID identified 45 in which Black residents were the majority (50.0% or more) of total residents, according to CID's analysis of the official California voter file. Less than a quarter of Black majority census tracts (11 census tracts) had comparably high eligible voter turnout (above 79.3%). In comparison, nearly half (1,332 of 2,871) of majority white, non-Latino census tracts had high eligible voter turnout.

Black Majority Census Tracts with High Voter Turnout had Lower Average Median Incomes than White, non-Latino Majority Census Tracts

Among Black majority census tracts with low overall eligible voter turnout (four census tracts), the average median income was $33,263, compared to $76,082 in Black majority census tracts with high eligible voter turnout (11 census tracts). Additionally, Black majority census tracts with high eligible voter turnout had lower average median incomes than white, non-Latino majority census tracts with high eligible voter turnout ($76,082 and $107,678, respectively).

Methods of Voting in Black Communities

Black Voters in Black Majority Census Tracts Utilized In-Person Voting Locations at Higher Rates than All Voters in All Census Tracts

In Black majority census tracts, 17.9% of Black voters voted in person at a vote center or polling place, compared to 12.5% of voters in all census tracts. Just over 20% of Black voters in Black majority census tracts returned their VBM ballots to a vote center or polling place, while only 16.2% of voters in all census tracts did the same. Black voters in Black majority census tracts voted by mail (26.3%) and via drop box (35.2%) both at lower rates than voters in all census tracts (33.0% and 37.2%, respectively).

All Voters in Black Plurality Census Tracts Voted by Mail at Higher Rates than All Voters in Black Majority Census Tracts

Nearly 29% of all voters in Black plurality census tracts voted by mail, compared to 25.9% of all voters in Black majority census tracts. Conversely, total voters in Black plurality census tracts voted in person (16.2%) at lower rates than voters in Black majority census tracts (18.5%). All voters in Black plurality and voters in Black majority census tracts had similar rates of voting via drop box (35.9% and 35.4%, respectively) and by vote center or polling place drop off (19.2% and 20.2%, respectively).

Sources of Election Information and Ballot Preferences of Black Voters

Over One-Third of Black Eligible Voters Knew About Election Changes

In a CID representative survey of California eligible voters (adult citizens), 35.6% of Black eligible voters reported knowing that their county had made changes in the 2020 general election for how and where voters could cast a ballot, the highest of any racial or ethnic group examined in the survey. Black eligible voters, however, also had the highest proportion (41.0%) of respondents who did not know about election changes in the 2020 general election.

Social Media and Traditional Media were the Largest Information Sources about Voting Options and Locations for Black Voters

Social media and traditional media were the top sources of information for all voters in the 2020 general election, with Black voters reporting social media as their top source at a slightly higher rate. Nearly 35.5% of Black eligible voters identified traditional media (newspapers and television news) as a source of information about new voting options in their county, compared to 39.5% of all voters. Nearly 39% of respondents identified social media as an information source surrounding election changes, compared to 34.5% of all voters.

Black Voters were Least Likely to Drive to an In-Person Voting Location

Just over 64% of Black eligible voters drove to their in-person voting location in the 2020 general election, the lowest of all racial and ethnic groups. Nearly 71% of Asian-American, 73.0% of Latino, and 70.3% of white, non-Latino eligible voters surveyed drove to their in-person voting location.

Black Voters were Twice as Likely to Take Public Transportation to Vote in Person than Other Racial and Ethnic Groups

Black voters had the highest rate of using public transportation to get to their in-person voting location. Over 10% of Black eligible voters used public transportation, compared to 4.1% of Asian-American, 5.4% of Latino, and 5.4% of white, non-Latino eligible voters.

Black Voters Reported that they Voted in Person to be Seen Representing Their Community and to Use Accessible Voting Machines at Higher Rates than Any Other Racial and Ethnic Group

Nearly 25% of Black eligible voters identified "to be seen representing my community" as a reason to vote in-person at a voting location. In comparison, 16.2% of Asian-American, 21.1% of Latino, and 20.0% of white, non-Latino eligible voters said the same. Just under 18% of Black eligible voters identified "to use an accessible voting machine for voters with disabilities" as a reason to vote in-person at a voting location. Just over 12% of Asian-American, 10.6% of Latino, and 14.6% of white, non-Latino eligible voters identified accessible voting machines as a reason for voting in-person.

Opportunities for the Engagement of Black Voters in California

Black Focus Group Participants Felt a Sense of Obligation to the Black Community to Vote.

Across all focus groups, the history and struggle for Black voting rights was very salient to Black voters and connected them to the act of voting personally with some variation in the intensity of this feeling by age and gender. Many voters also felt a duty to their community and felt that by voting they could make an impact on policy while others were more skeptical.

Black Voters Had Diverse Reasons for Selecting a Specific Voting Method

Black voters prioritized convenience, security, and benefits of social interaction when deciding how and where to cast their ballots. Security had a different meaning for each voter, while some found a drop box most secure others thought in-person was the safest.

Black Voters Changed Methods on How to Vote Based on Several Variables

Black voters most commonly switched voting methods in the 2020 general election because their voting location had changed which encouraged them to vote by mail. Some decided to vote in person due to a last-minute issue with their ballot, or for security or health reasons.

Black Voters Want to Continue Having Multiple Options for Voting in Future Elections

Focus group participants expressed an appreciation for the options they had in the 2020 general election, and many voters that changed their method for how or where they cast their ballot did so because of a last-minute issue that required either voting in person or using a VBM ballot. Some Black voters were also excited by the option to enroll in BallotTrax and wanted to use this feature in future elections.

Note: For a discussion on the data sources used in this report, as well as data limitations among these sources, see the report's methodology section.

Introduction

In the 2020 general election, a record-breaking 17 million ballots were cast in California. With a competitive presidential election, universal vote-by-mail ballot access, and increased mobilization efforts by many groups, the 2020 general election's environment proved conducive for historically high participation rates, including for many groups historically underrepresented in the electoral process. In California and across the country, voters of color expressed their voices at the ballot box, even while facing pandemic limitations, and greatly influenced electoral outcomes, from the presidential race to highly salient state and local races.

While voter participation was high in the 2020 general election, it is important to identify the differing experiences of voters of color in the state. Higher turnout rates do not automatically translate into the same turnout growth for all groups, nor do they guarantee a narrowing of the turnout disparities between voters of color and white voters that have been entrenched historically in the nation's electoral system. It is essential to understand more fully how voters of color engage with the electoral system—including their preferences for how and when to cast their ballot— in order to inform non-partisan efforts aimed at increasing both participation and representation in the voting process, ultimately strengthening the democratic process in California.

For this report, part of a series on the 2020 general election, CID analyzed the participation of Black voters in California during the 2020 general election, and their experiences engaging with the electoral system, as well as voting preferences in future elections. Forthcoming CID reports will also include an in-depth look at formerly incarcerated voters and indigenous communities.

This report addresses the following four research questions:

1. What are the turnout characteristics of Black communities in the California 2020 general election?
2. What methods of voting did Black communities use in the 2020 general election?
3. What are the sources of election information for Black voters and what are their preferences for how they cast their ballots?
4. What are the opportunities for the engagement of Black voters in California?

Research question one examines the turnout profiles of the state's Black communities for the 2020 general election. Research question two breaks out the voting methods used in Black communities (mail, drop off location, drop box, or in-person). Question three explores Black voters' knowledge of voting changes in the 2020 general election, as well as preferences for how they cast a ballot. Lastly, research question four provides an in-depth discussion of opportunities for the engagement of Black voters, particularly with respect to when and how they cast a ballot in California.

This report opens with a discussion of the 2020 general election context, along with an overview of historic and current turnout of Black voters in California. The subsequent sections each present an analysis of the research questions posed in this report.

Study Data Sources and Methodology

Turnout History: Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement

Due to differing limitations in available demographic voter data, CID draws on multiple data sources in order to address the questions in this report. This report presents an overview of Black voter turnout at the state level using data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) Voting and Registration Supplement. The CPS Voting and Registration Supplement is a national survey conducted to produce data on voter characteristics, voter trends, and turnout rates over time and across all fifty U.S. states.[1]

CPS data is the most utilized estimate of voter turnout in the U.S., aside from official state voter files that largely do not provide demographic identification. However, CPS data can be problematic for research purposes because of the overreporting and occasional underreporting of self-reported turnout by some respondents. CPS survey non-response rates also vary by voter demographic group, with adjustments made by the CPS largely understood as inadequate and problematic. Examinations of CPS data have found that these issues often produce unreliable state turnout rates, especially for voters of color. Additionally, analysis of voter behavior with CPS data is best confined to the state level, as data reliability further declines greatly at smaller geographies.

Even with its limitations, CPS voter turnout data is widely used by many researchers and practitioners as it is the only publicly available data source that includes Black voter turnout with race and ethnicity identified by the survey respondents themselves, and which is available for all 50 states with a common methodology.[2]

Research Questions One and Two: California Secretary of State Voter File

This report presents analyses of voter turnout and voting methods in Black communities within California using the state's official voter file, as provided by the California Secretary of State's office (VoteCal database system).[3] With this data source, CID identifies Black voter turnout at the community level (measured at the census tract level). We note here that sections discussing turnout and voting methods in Black communities only represent trends in these specific communities. Since turnout and voting methods likely vary in different communities across the state, data observations found in these sections are not intended to reflect trends for Black voters throughout California, particularly those living in communities with comparably low numbers of Black voters. In California, as with most U.S. states, residents are not required to self-report their race and ethnicity when registering to vote. The majority of voters do not answer the optional question collecting this information in the registration process.[4]

The commonly applied research method to identify a voter's race and ethnicity from state voter records uses a combination of the registrant's name (surname analysis) and neighborhood characteristics (geocoding with census tract or census block data) to infer a voter's race and ethnicity based on population distributions. The accuracy of surname matching and geocoding to identify a voter's race and ethnicity varies by group and population size, and is especially challenging for the Black population. Surname analysis is most accurate for racial and ethnic groups that tend to have distinct surnames (e.g., Latinos and Asian Americans), and less accurate for groups with surnames common to multiple races and ethnicities (e.g., non-Latino white and Black residents). The accuracy of geocoding varies by the racial and ethnic makeup of the area, and it especially challenging in areas with low populations of certain races and ethnicities. This is especially true in many California counties where nearly every census tract has a proportionally small Black population (6.7% of the state's overall adult citizen population or 1.8 million is Black) and geocoding can erroneously assign Black voters to other racial and ethnic groups (or vice versa). However, geocoding generally can help produce some level of accuracy identifying Black voters at the census tract level where the Black proportion of the population is high, especially given the fact that Black voters are more likely than other groups to live in segregated neighborhoods.

Due to the difficulty in reliably identifying Black voters at the county level (e.g. for county to county turnout comparisons) through geocoding, we limit our analysis of Black voter turnout using official voter file data in communities where the Black population is a majority of the overall population.

The official voter file (VoteCal database) provided to CID by the California Secretary of State's office included the individual registrant's date of birth (used to identify age), party affiliation, voting activity, registration date, type of ballot cast (in person, mail, or provisional), VBM ballot rejection status, and reasons for ballot rejection. Gender, race, and ethnicity were not present for the majority of voters in these files. The data file provided did not include registrants' names or addresses, both necessary indicators for identifying an individual's race and ethnicity.

In order to conduct a turnout and voting method analysis of Black communities for this report, we merged the official voter file with data provided by Political Data Inc. (PDI). This data source provided California registrants' names and addresses, as well as their identified race or ethnicity through first name analysis, surname matching, and geocoding.[5] As a part of CID's data validation process, we compared PDI's race and ethnicity estimates to our own analysis of these

demographic characteristics from the merged voter file. We used an alternative but widely cited method (an extension of the ecological inference model) by Princeton University political methodologists Kosuke Imai and Kabir Khanna (WRU: Who are you?).[6] We found consistency between the two approaches with regard to the frequency in the identification of Black registrants, as well as Asian Americans and Latinos.

Limited demographic information in county and state voter files hinders progress to improve the election experience for all voters. We encourage elections officials, policymakers, and stakeholders to discuss legal and reliable ways to gather more complete demographic data in California (and nationwide) during and after the voter registration process.

Research Question Three: CID California Voter Experience Survey

In order to better understand the sources of election information voters use and their preferences for how and when to cast a ballot, we conducted a representative survey of eligible voters (adult citizens) in California. This report highlights survey responses for the eligible Black voter population in the state, along with comparable data for Latino, Asian-American, and non-Latino white eligible Californians. Due to Los Angeles County's large proportion of the total number of California's voters (roughly a quarter) in the 2020 general election, we also present data in this report for Los Angeles County alone. For survey findings by age group (for the total population) and for eligible voters with disabilities, please see CID's report, California Changing Electorate: A 2020 Post Election Analysis of Voting Behavior.

The survey's total sample is 11,423 eligible voters. This large sample included outsized numbers of citizens from California's largest racial and ethnic groups, as identified by respondents themselves. Surveys were conducted in both English and Spanish. The margin of error for the total survey sample is +/-2.7%. We fielded the survey from June 15-July 13, 2021 (a preliminary survey was fielded in May), recording the views of a diverse sample in which 44.5% of respondents are white (non-Latino), 30.9% are Latino, 15.5% are Asian American, and 9.2% are Black. (Since some Latinos are members of multiple racial groups, these numbers total 100.9%. The proportion of the survey sample for Black respondents was, by design, greater than the Black proportion of the state's eligible voter population (6.7%) as determined by the California Department of Finance. To further ensure that our findings reflect the Black population, we created survey weights based on the demographic characteristics of this population and report all results using those weights. Please note that raw response counts are below 100 on some subgroup responses presented in this report for Los Angeles County.

Research Question Four: CID Focus Group with Black Voters

To better understand the opportunities for elections officials and community groups to more effectively outreach to Black voters in California, CID conducted seven focus groups with Black California voters, constructed with a range of participant age groups, income levels, educational attainment, gender, ballot type use, and voting frequency. These focus groups included 6 to 10 participants each, and were conducted virtually with participants in the Bay Area, Sacramento, San Diego, the Central Valley, and the Los Angeles area. The focus groups produced in-depth discussions that revealed why and how Black voters in California engage with the electoral process, particularly with respect to when and by what voting method they cast a ballot.

2020 General Election Context

COVID-19 Pandemic Funding

The 2020 general election was held during the COVID-19 pandemic, presenting multiple challenges to conducting a safe and accessible election. The California State Legislature passed several bills in response to these safety issues. The bills provided additional funds for the general election and expanded voting options to minimize the health risks of casting a vote in person.

Assembly Bill 89 and Assembly Bill 100 appropriated state and county funding for the 2020 general election consistent with California's requirements to reduce the spread of COVID-19.[7] Funds provided by the bills were in addition to funds allocated under state and local budget authority as part of the normal conduct of elections. A portion of the funding provided by the two bills was used for the following 2020 general election costs during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Increased costs related to all aspects of voting by mail
- Equipment needs for processing increased VBM ballots and meeting the in-person voting requirements
- Permanent and temporary staffing
- Additional security
- Specialized training of staff and election workers
- Cleaning and disinfection
- Personal protective equipment, polling locations, and election facilities
- Outreach and communication

Changes to Election Administration

The California State Legislature also passed bills directing changes to how the 2020 general election was administered in order to ensure a safe and accessible election. Assembly Bill 860 made significant changes to vote-by-mail (VBM) access by requiring every county elections office to mail all of their registered voters a VBM ballot. Additionally, the bill expanded the window of acceptance for a VBM ballot by two additional weeks in response to delays that the United States Postal Service (USPS) was experiencing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, VBM ballots that were mailed were accepted by elections offices if post marked on or before Election Day and received by the county elections office no later than 17 days after Election Day. Senate Bill 423 partially waived the minimally required number, location, duration, and operational hours of vote centers, polling places, and ballot drop-off locations offered by counties.[8]

Recent California Election Reforms

Over the past decade, California has enacted a number of election reforms aimed at increasing access to the ballot box. Many of these reforms were explicitly enacted with the goal of addressing significant disparities in the state's electoral system and ultimately to make the state's electorate more representative of the State's overall population. Since 2012, California has implemented the following major election reforms by or before November 2020:

- Online Voter Registration Implemented 2012 statewide[9]
- Automatic Voter Registration Implemented 2018 statewide[10]
- Voter's Choice Act Implemented 2018 in select counties[11]
- Conditional Voter Registration Implemented 2020 statewide[12]

U.S. Voting Rights Act of 1965

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is considered to be one of the most sweeping pieces of civil rights legislation in U.S. history. It prohibited racial discrimination in voting and aimed to ensure the right to vote for racial minorities in the U.S. under the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments. The Act contained several provisions for elections: it outlawed voting restrictions based on race or language, banned literacy tests, and effectively barred poll taxes. It also required certain jurisdictions with histories of voting discrimination to have any change in voting rules approved by the U.S. attorney general or U.S. District court in D.C before it could be implemented. However, the U.S. Supreme Court's 2013 decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* made this preclearance coverage formula void. Since its implementation, the Voting Rights Act has helped increase voter turnout and registration in the U.S. and California, especially among Black communities and other communities of color.

California Voting Rights Act of 2001

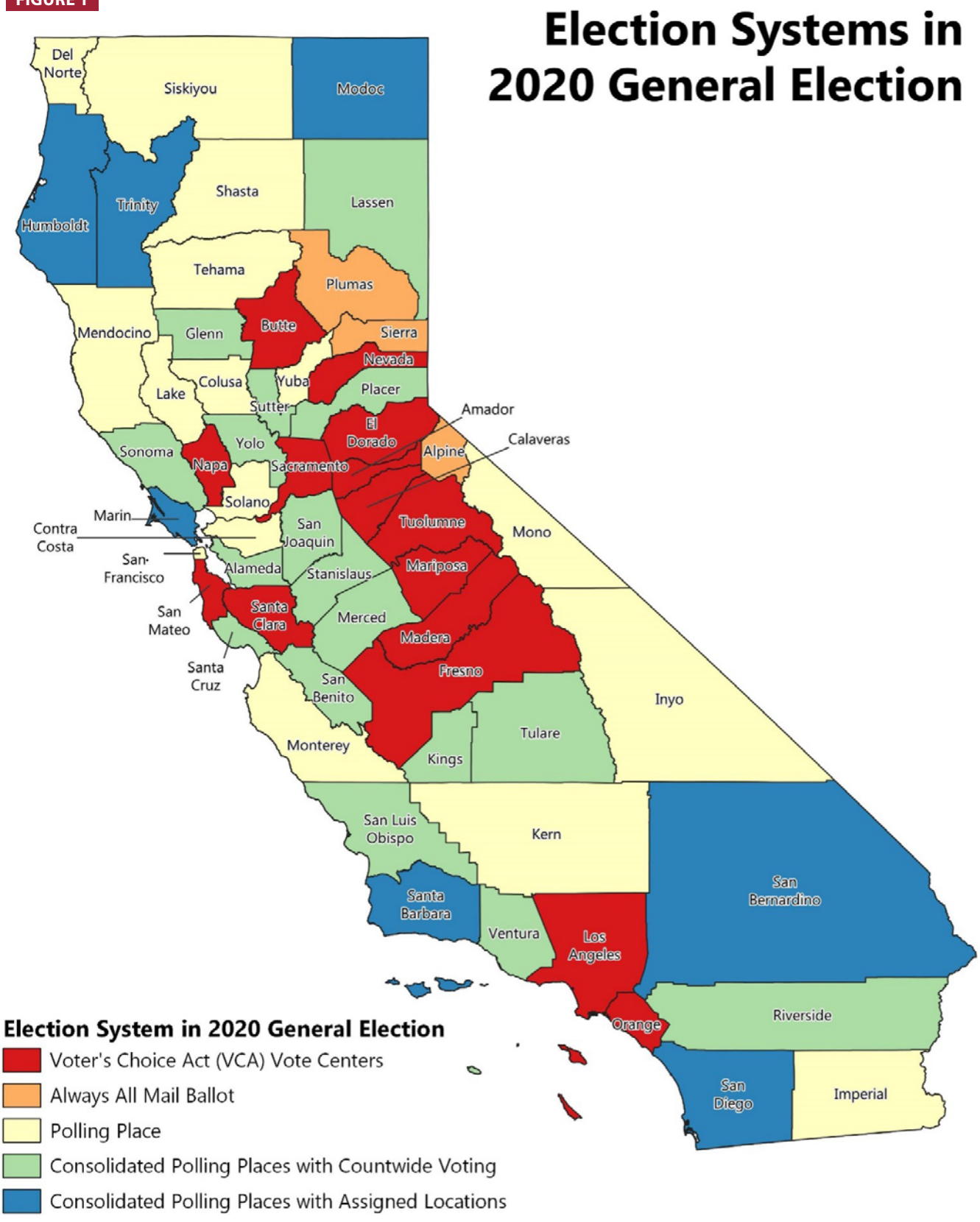
Signed into law in 2002, The California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) expands voting rights that are protected under the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965. Among other provisions, it grants standing to groups too geographically dispersed to bring a successful lawsuit under the Federal Voting Rights Act. This eases the path for switching to district-based elections or other proportional voting systems as remedies for minority vote dilution. For more information see, California Assembly Bill 182.[13] This provision enables minority voters, including Black voters, to increase their representation in largely white, non-Latino controlled districts.

Voter's Choice Act

In 2016, Governor Jerry Brown signed Senate Bill 450, which allows California counties to choose to adopt a new voting system known as the Voter's Choice Act (VCA).[14] The new voting model replaces neighborhood polling places with multi-service vote centers available up to ten days before Election Day. VCA counties send vote-by-mail ballots to all registered voters who can return them by mail, at a vote center, or at a secure ballot drop box. Voters may vote in person by completing a ballot at a vote center.

In the 2020 election cycle, 15 California counties opted to conduct elections as prescribed by the Voter's Choice Act (VCA). These VCA counties comprised approximately half (49.6%) of California's registered voter population. The following 15 counties opted to adopt the VCA for the 2020 election cycle: Amador, Butte, Calaveras, El Dorado, Fresno, Los Angeles, Madera, Mariposa, Napa, Nevada, Orange, Sacramento, San Mateo, Santa Clara, and Tuolumne. Five counties (Sacramento, San Mateo, Madera, Napa, and Nevada) first adopted the VCA voting model in the 2018 election cycle. Eligible voters in these counties had therefore had additional exposure to the VCA model compared to eligible voters in the ten counties that adopted the voting model for the first time in the 2020 election cycle.

FIGURE 1



Data Source: California Secretary of State

Historic and Current Turnout Rates for Black Voters in California

With over 17 million votes, the eligible voter turnout rate (percent of adult citizens who voted) in California's 2020 general election was the highest since 1952, according to the California Secretary of State (see appendix for official Secretary of State eligible voter turnout rates).[15] While the overall eligible voter turnout rate in the 2020 general election was high, is important to understand how the overall increase translated to representation of California's Black voters.

With low self-identification rates for race and ethnicity in the official California voter file and largely unreliable methods for identifying Black (and white, non-Latino) voters via surname matching and geocoding for a state level analysis, opportunities for research on Black voters using the California voter file has limitations (see report's methodology section).

Using data from Current Population Survey (CPS) Voting and Registration Supplement, the following section presents turnout rates for Black eligible voters at the state level for California, along with a comparison to the turnout rates of other racial and ethnic groups.

CPS Voting and Registration Supplement is one the most commonly used sources for voter turnout data among researchers, but its use is also limited, especially for voters of color. Due to overreporting and non-response rates, CPS turnout rates often differ from those reported through official state voter files. Further, CPS voter data is largely not reliable below a state level. Because of these limitations, we present the following analysis of the CPS Voting and Registration Supplement as only informational and suggest caution when interpreting the specific numbers reported by the CPS. For more information on the CPS Voting and Registration Supplement, see this report's methodology section.

Black Eligible Voter Turnout

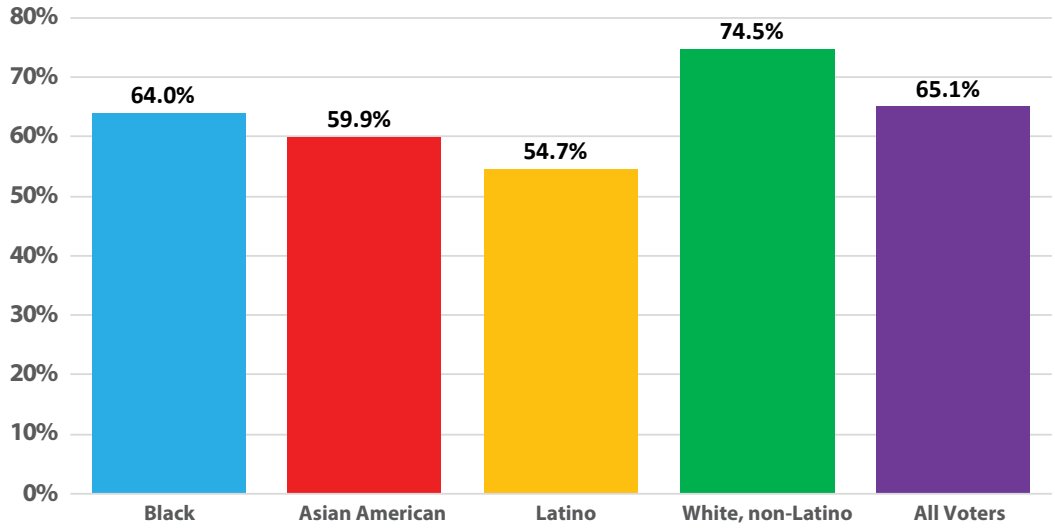
Voting in the U.S. and California is a two-step process. Eligible residents must first register to vote before they are able to exercise their voice at the ballot box. However, disparities in California registration rates (the percent of adult citizens who are registered to vote), although smaller since the time of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, are still significant across racial and ethnic groups. According to CPS data, in every general election over the past sixteen years, Black registration rates have been lower than white, non-Latino registration rates (the racial group with consistently the highest registration rates in California), with the size of the gap between Black and white rates fluctuating to some degree from election to election. According to CPS data, the registration rate gap between Black and white, non-Latino eligible voters in the 2020 general election was 10.1 percentage points (68.1% and 78.2%, respectively) and 15.4 percentage points in the 2016 general election (57.6% and 73.0%, respectively).

Due to the significant disparities present in registration rates by race and ethnicity in California, we examine turnout as a percentage of the eligible voter population, not as a percentage of the registered voter population. See appendix for CPS 2004-2020 registration rate data

FIGURE 2

Eligible Voter Turnout - Race and Ethnicity

California 2020 General Elections

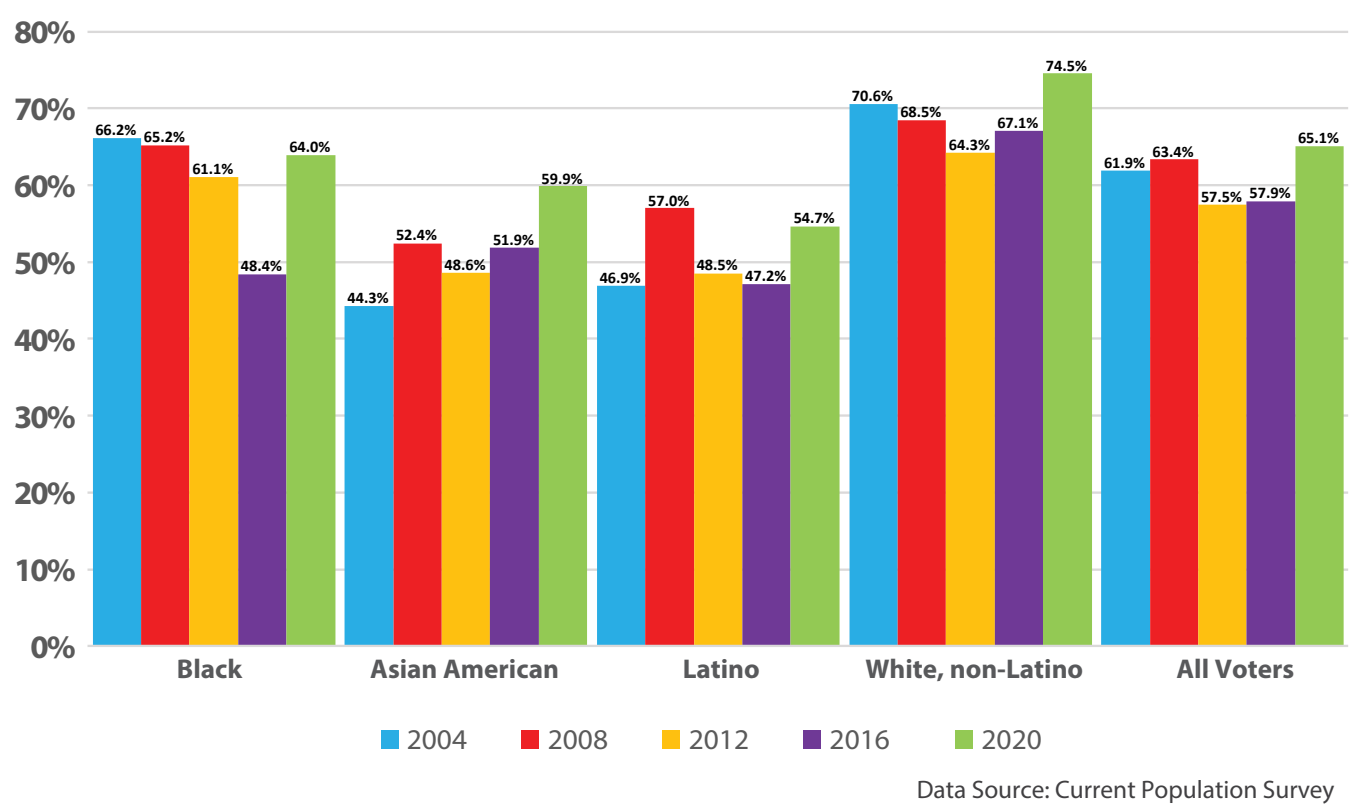


Data Source: Current Population Survey

Figure 2 shows the eligible turnout rates for the four largest racial and ethnic groups in California in the 2020 general election, drawing on CPS data. Black eligible voters had lower turnout rates than white, non-Latino voters and the general population. While nearly 75% of eligible white, non-Latino voters and 65.1% of all voters cast a ballot, 64.0% of eligible Black voters voted (10.5 percentage points below white, non-Latinos).

Black voters did, however, have higher eligible voter turnout rates than both Asian-American and Latino eligible voters, both of which had larger turnout gaps with white, non-Latino eligible voters. Almost 60% of Asian-American eligible voters cast a ballot, 4.1 percentage points lower than Black eligible voters and 14.6 percentage points lower than white, non-Latino eligible voters. Nearly 55% of Latino eligible voters voted in the 2020 general election, which was 9.3 percentage points lower than Black eligible voters and 19.8 percentage points lower than white, non-Latino eligible voters.

FIGURE 3

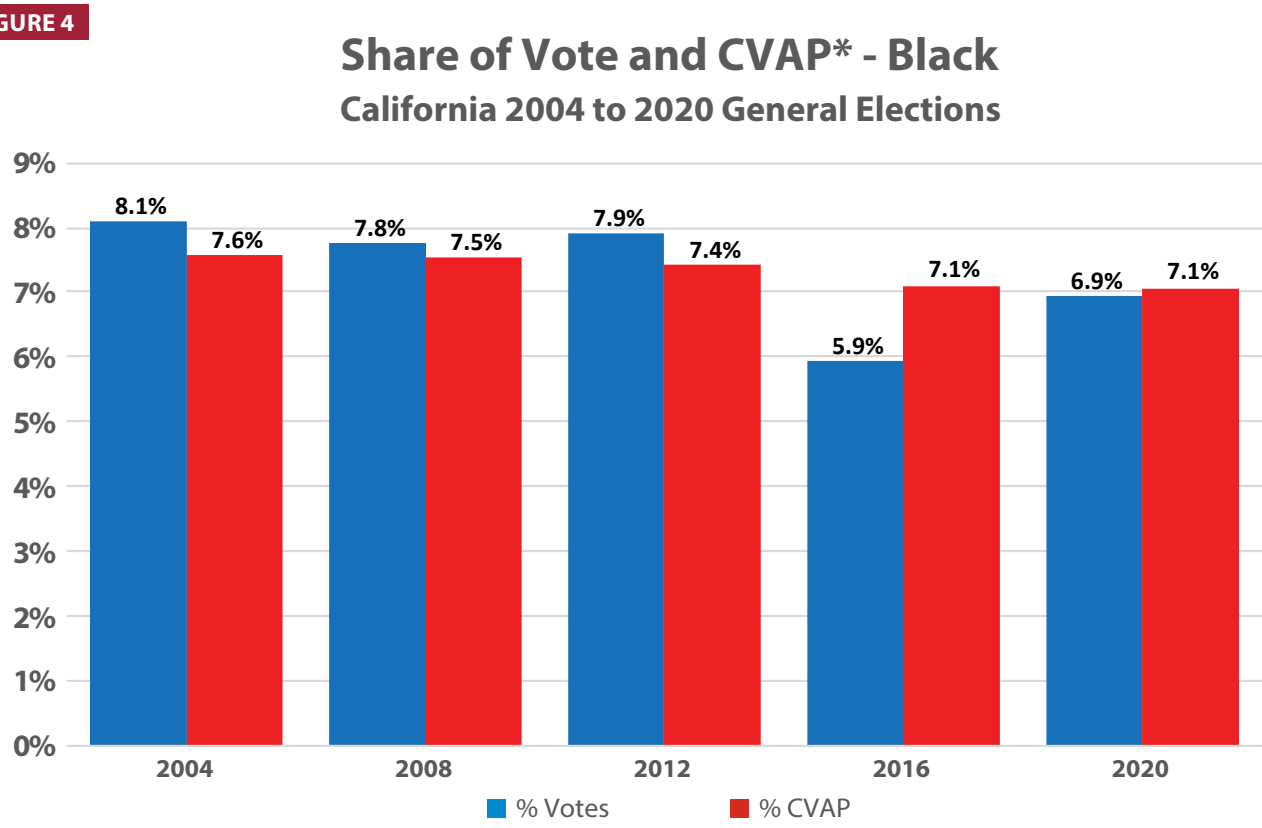


Looking at turnout rates historically, Black eligible voters have had lower turnout rates when compared to white, non-Latino voters in every California general election over the past sixteen years (2004 to 2020). Additionally, the turnout gap between Black and white, non-Latino voters has increased over the same time period. In the 2004 general election, there was a 4.4 percentage point turnout gap between Black (66.2%) and white, non-Latino (70.6%) eligible voters and in the 2008 general election, there was a 3.3 percentage point turnout gap between Black (65.2%) and white, non-Latino (68.5%) eligible voters. The turnout gap between Black and white, non-Latino eligible voters widened to 18.7 percentage points in the 2016 general election (48.4% and 67.1%, respectively) and 10.5 percentage points in the 2020 general election (64.0% and 74.5%, respectively).

Asian-American and Latino eligible voters generally have had larger turnout gaps compared to white, non-Latino voters than Black eligible voters. Unlike turnout gaps seen among Black eligible voters, however, Asian-American and Latino turnout gaps over the past five general elections have been narrowing. In the 2004 general election, there was a 26.3 percentage point turnout gap between Asian-American (44.3%) and white, non-Latino (70.6%) eligible voters and a 23.7 percentage point turnout gap between Latino (46.9%) and white, non-Latino eligible voters (70.6%). In the 2020 general election, the Asian-American and white, non-Latino turnout gap narrowed to 14.6 percentage points (59.9% and 74.5%, respectively) and the Latino and white, non-Latino turnout gap narrowed to 19.8 percentage points (54.7% and 74.5%, respectively).

Share of Votes and Eligible Voters by Race and Ethnicity

FIGURE 4

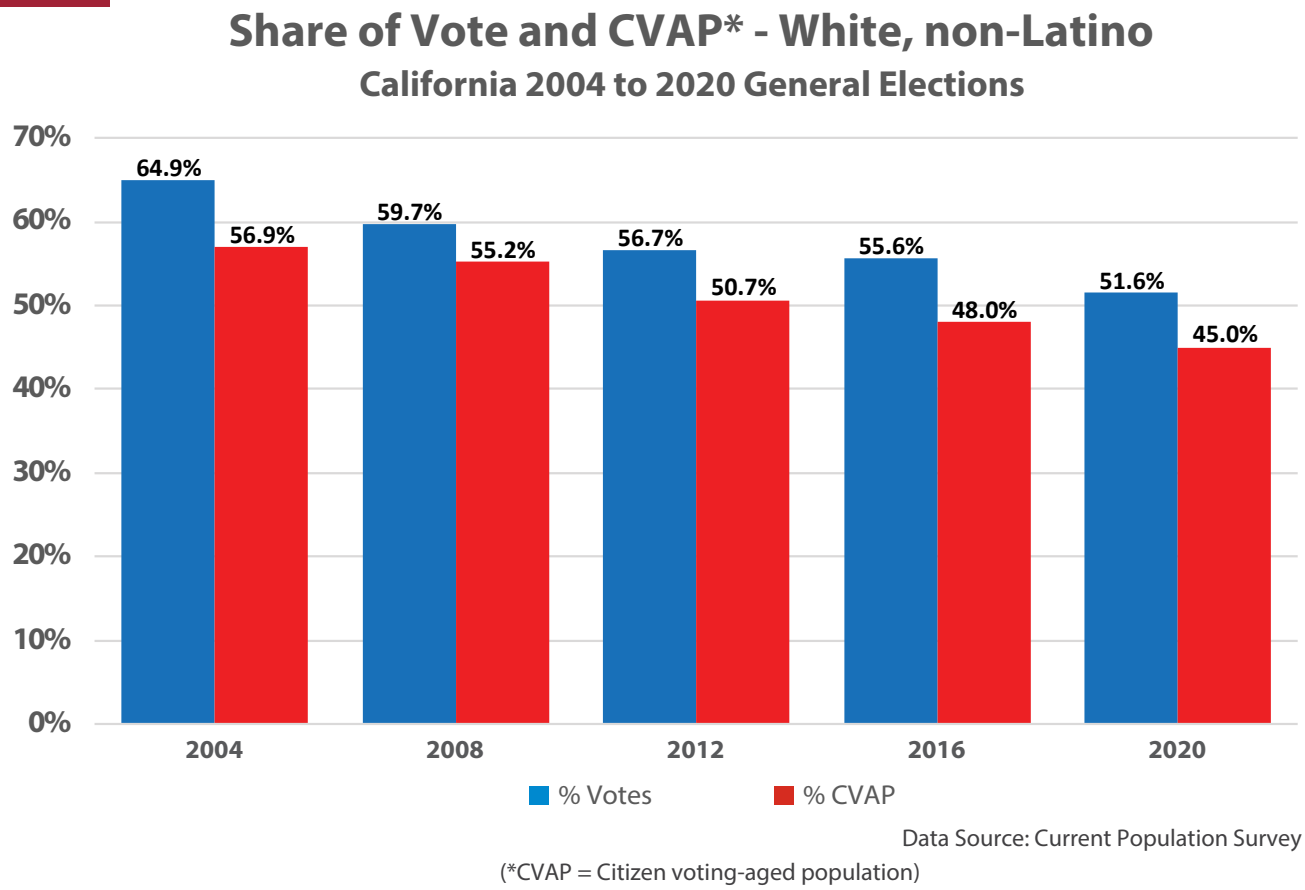


Legislative election reforms and non-partisan mobilization efforts in California are often aimed at not only increasing voter participation, but also recognizing the importance of achieving greater representation (numerically) in the voting process. Disparities in voter turnout rates across racial and ethnic groups translate into some groups being underrepresented among voters casting ballots in an election, compared to the same group's share of the overall eligible voter population (adult citizens). In the U.S. and California, it is voters of color who are typically underrepresented and, conversely, non-Latino white voters, the group with the highest turnout rates, who are considerably and consistently overrepresented at the ballot box compared to their share of the eligible voter population.

Figure 4 shows that in the 2016 and 2020 general elections, Black voters represented a somewhat smaller share of total voters than their share of all eligible voters. In 2016, Black voters represented 5.9% of all votes and Black eligible voters represented 7.1% of all eligible voters (1.2 percentage point difference). In 2020, Black voters represented 6.9% of all votes, while Black eligible voters represented 7.1% of all eligible voters (0.2 percentage point difference).

However, in the 2004, 2008, and 2012 general elections, Black voters represented a slightly larger share of total voters than their share of eligible voters. In 2004, Black voters represented 8.1% of all votes cast, while eligible Black voters represented 7.6% of all eligible voters (0.5 percentage point difference). In 2008, Black voters represented 7.8% of total votes and eligible Black voters represented 7.5% of all eligible voters (0.3 percentage point difference). In 2012, Black voters represented 7.9% of all votes cast and Black eligible voters represented 7.4% of all eligible voters (0.5 percentage point difference).

FIGURE 5



In every general election between 2004 and 2020, white, non-Latino voters have represented a larger share of votes than their share of eligible voters (Figure 5) The white, non-Latino population's share of all votes ranged from 51.6% (2020) to 64.9% (2004), while their share of eligible voters ranged from 45.0% (2020) to 56.9% (2004). While they continue to be overrepresented in their share of total votes, the white, non-Latino share of both total votes and total eligible voters has been consistently declining since 2004. Additionally, since the 2004 general election, the overrepresentation gap of white, non-Latino's share of votes and share of CVAP has decreased from 8.0 percentage points in 2004 to 6.6 percentage points in 2020. See report's appendix for representation data for California Latino and Asian-American voters.

Research Question One

What are the Turnout Characteristics of Black Communities in California?

Eligible Voter Turnout – All Census Tracts

Utilizing data from the official California voter file from the California Secretary of State's office, CID conducted a turnout analysis at the census tract level to present a community-level look at Black voter turnout, including voting method, in the 2020 general election.

Communities are typically defined by variables difficult to measure, such as shared identities, shared histories, common objectives, and shared interests. Defining a community is difficult using traditional methodologies and they rarely obey the geographic limitations we commonly use to divide our country, such as states, counties, zip codes, and census tracts. Because of these limitations, we define Black communities as census tracts with either a majority of residents who are Black (50.0% or more) or census tracts where the share of residents who are Black is higher than any other race or ethnicity's share (e.g., plurality). Black plurality census tracts include the census tracts in which Black residents are the majority. The same approach is used to identify Asian-American, Latino, and white, non-Latino communities throughout this report. Due to different methodologies, turnout rates discussed here should not be compared with CPS data.

We note here that this report's discussion of voter turnout in Black majority and Black plurality census tracts only represent turnout trends in these communities. Since turnout likely varies in different communities across the state, observations found in this section are not intended to reflect turnout trends for Black voters throughout California, particularly those living in communities with low proportions of Black residents.

In the following section, we first examine Black voters within Black majority census tracts. Black majority census tracts have Black populations large enough to reliably identify Black voters through surname matching and geocoding of all groups. Due to data limitations, as discussed in this report's methodology section, identifying Black voters is difficult in census tracts that do not have proportionally large Black populations. We then discuss findings for all resident voters in Black communities, measured as both Black majority and Black plurality census tracts. By analyzing turnout of all voters within these census tracts, we are able to understand communities' voting power as a whole and better understand the level of political engagement. We then present profiles of turnout (high and low turnout) in Black communities, as well turnout of Asian-American, Latino, and white, non-Latino communities in California.

As of the 2020 Decennial Census, California has 9,129 census tracts. Census tracts are statistical units with a maximum of 8,000 residents. Eligible voter turnout is defined as the percent of the citizen voting-age population (CVAP) who cast a ballot that was counted in the 2020 general election. For eligible voter turnout calculations in census tracts, CVAP data was collected from the American Community Survey (2015-2019, 5-year estimates) and the total vote numbers were derived from the official California voter file. Additionally, census tract demographics were defined by data from the 2020 Decennial Census.

Eligible voter turnout rates in California's census tracts varied in the 2020 general election, ranging from 0.0% (no population) to 99.9%. Table 1 shows the breakdown of eligible voter turnout among census tracts.

Table 1: Eligible Voter Turnout Quantiles - All Voters
California 2020 General Census Tracts

	Low Turnout				High Turnout	
Quintile	**0%**	**20%**	**40%**	**60%**	**80%**	**100%**
EVT	**0.0%**	**52.4%**	**61.3%**	**69.1%**	**79.3%**	**99.9%**

Data Source: Statewide Database
Defintions Low EVT: Below 52.4%
High EVT: Above 79.3%

For the purpose of this analysis, CID defined low eligible voter turnout as eligible voter turnout below the 20% quintile (52.4%) and high eligible voter turnout as eligible voter turnout above the 80% quintile (79.3%) for the total voting population. The following tables outline most commonly attained education levels and income in low and high eligible voter turnout census tracts.

When casting a ballot, voters vote at the precinct level. However, for this analysis, all data was aggregated to the census tract level and precincts do not always perfectly fit inside census tracts. For this reason, a small number of census tracts have very low (below 10%) or very high (above 90%) eligible voter turnout rates. Some census tracts have little to zero population. All census tracts, including those with very low and high turnout results, are included in this analysis. However, in the following sections, we omitted a discussion of census tracts with 0.0% turnout rates due to a lack of relevancy in a community-based comparison.

In order to confirm this analysis was not heavily influenced by these small numbers of census tracts, we completed the same analysis omitting eligible voter turnout below 10% and above 90%. The general trends presented in the following sections remained the same. With the 10% and 90% cutoffs, low eligible voter turnout was below 52.1% (20% quintile) and high eligible voter turnout was above 76.9% (80% quintile). All average median incomes remained similar when comparing demographic groups, although some decreased slightly. The majority of education levels also remained the same, with the exception of the most commonly attained education level in Black plurality census tracts with high eligible voter turnout, which changed to some college or associate degree, and Asian-American plurality census tracts with low eligible voter turnout, which changed to bachelor's degree or higher.

Table 2: Census Tract Eligible Voter Turnout Levels - All Voters
California 2020 General Election

	All Census Tracts	
	w/ Low Eligible Voter Turnout	w/ High Eligible Voter Turnout
Number of Census Tracts	1,771	1,964
Most Commonly Attained Education Level	Some College or Associate Degree	Bachelors Degree or Higher
Average Median Income	$44,470	$104,214

Data Source: Secretary of State Voter File, 2020 Decennial Census, American Community Survey 2015-2019 5 year

Table 2 shows 1,771 census tracts in California had low eligible voter turnout and 1,964 census tracts had high eligible voter turnout in the 2020 general election (See Table 1 for definitions of low and high turnout). Census tracts with low eligible voter turnout had average median incomes ($44,470) that were less than half the average median incomes in high eligible voter turnout census tracts ($104,214). The most commonly attained education level in low eligible voter turnout census tracts was some college or associate degree, while census tracts with high eligible voter turnout rates had a most commonly attained education level of bachelor's degree or higher.

Eligible Voter Turnout – Black Voters in Majority Black Census Tracts

Table 3: Eligible Voter Turnout - Black Voters
Black Majority Census Tracts
California 2020 General Election

Eligible	Voted	EVT
96,353	72,453	75.2%

Data Source: Secretary of State Voter File, 2020 Decennial Census

Through an analysis of the voter file (see methodology section), CID identified 72,453 Black voters in Black majority census tracts who cast ballots in the 2020 general election. The eligible voter turnout rate among Black voters in majority Black census tracts was 75.2%. This turnout rate is notably higher than the total eligible voter turnout (67.6%) for California overall (all census tracts combined).

Eligible Voter Turnout – All Voters in Majority Black Census Tracts

Table 4: Eligible Voter Turnout Levels - Black Census Tracts California 2020 General Election				
	Black Majority Census Tracts		Black Plurality Census Tracts	
	w/ Low Eligible Voter Turnout	w/ High Eligible Voter Turnout	w/ Low Eligible Voter Turnout	w/ High Eligible Voter Turnout
Number of Census Tracts	4	11	17	22
Most Commonly Attained Education Level	Some College or Associate Degree	Some College or Associate Degree	Some College or Associate Degree	Bachelors Degree or Higher
Average Median Income	$33,263	$76,082	$32,730	$71,825

Data Source: Secretary of State Voter File, 2020 Decennial Census, American Community Survey 2015-2019 5 year

At the time of the 2020 general election, there were 45 census tracts in which the population was 50.0% or more Black. In California, 5.3% of the state's Black population lived in Black majority census tracts in 2020. The share of the population within these tracts that were Black ranged from 50.1% (Los Angeles County) to 82.7% (Los Angeles County). The vast majority (42) of census tracts with a Black majority were located in Los Angeles County, with the remaining three in Alameda County. See Figures 6-9 for maps identifying the location of these census tracts.

As shown in Table 4, four Black majority census tracts had low eligible voter turnout and 11 had high eligible voter turnout. While the most commonly attained education level was the same between low and high eligible voter turnout census tracts (some college or associate degree), the average median income in high eligible voter turnout census tracts ($76,082) was more than twice the average median income in low eligible voter turnout census tracts ($33,263).

Eligible voter turnout for all voters in Black majority census tracts ranged from 42.7% (Los Angeles County) to 93.8% (Los Angeles County). In Los Angeles County, majority Black census tracts in south Los Angeles County had higher eligible voter turnout than majority Black census tracts in north Los Angeles County. In Alameda County, majority Black census tracts in West Oakland had lower eligible voter turnout rates than majority Black census tracts further inland.

Eligible Voter Turnout – All Voters in Plurality Black Census Tracts

In 2020, there were 92 census tracts in which the share of the population that was Black was higher than any other race or ethnicity (Black plurality). In California, 8.3% of the state's Black population lived in Black plurality census tracts in 2020. The share of the population within these tracts that was Black ranged from 25.6% (Contra Costa County) to 82.7% (Los Angeles County). The majority (62) of these tracts were located in Los Angeles County, with the remaining in Alameda County (16), San Francisco County (3), Contra Costa County (5), Marin County (2), Sacramento County (2), and Solano County (2). In Los Angeles County, census tracts with a Black plurality were concentrated in South Los Angeles, mostly in Culver City, Inglewood, and Compton. See Figures 10-14 identifying the location of these census tracts.

In census tracts with a Black plurality, 17 had low eligible voter turnout and 22 had high eligible voter turnout (Table 4). In census tracts with a Black plurality and low eligible voter turnout, the most commonly attained education level was some college or associate degree, and the average median income was $32,730. Black plurality census tracts with high eligible voter turnout had higher most commonly attained education levels (bachelor's degree or higher) and twice the average median income ($71,825) of census tracts with low eligible voter turnout. Eligible voter turnout for voters in census tracts with a plurality of Black residents ranged from 0.5% (Marin County) to 98.0% (Los Angeles County).

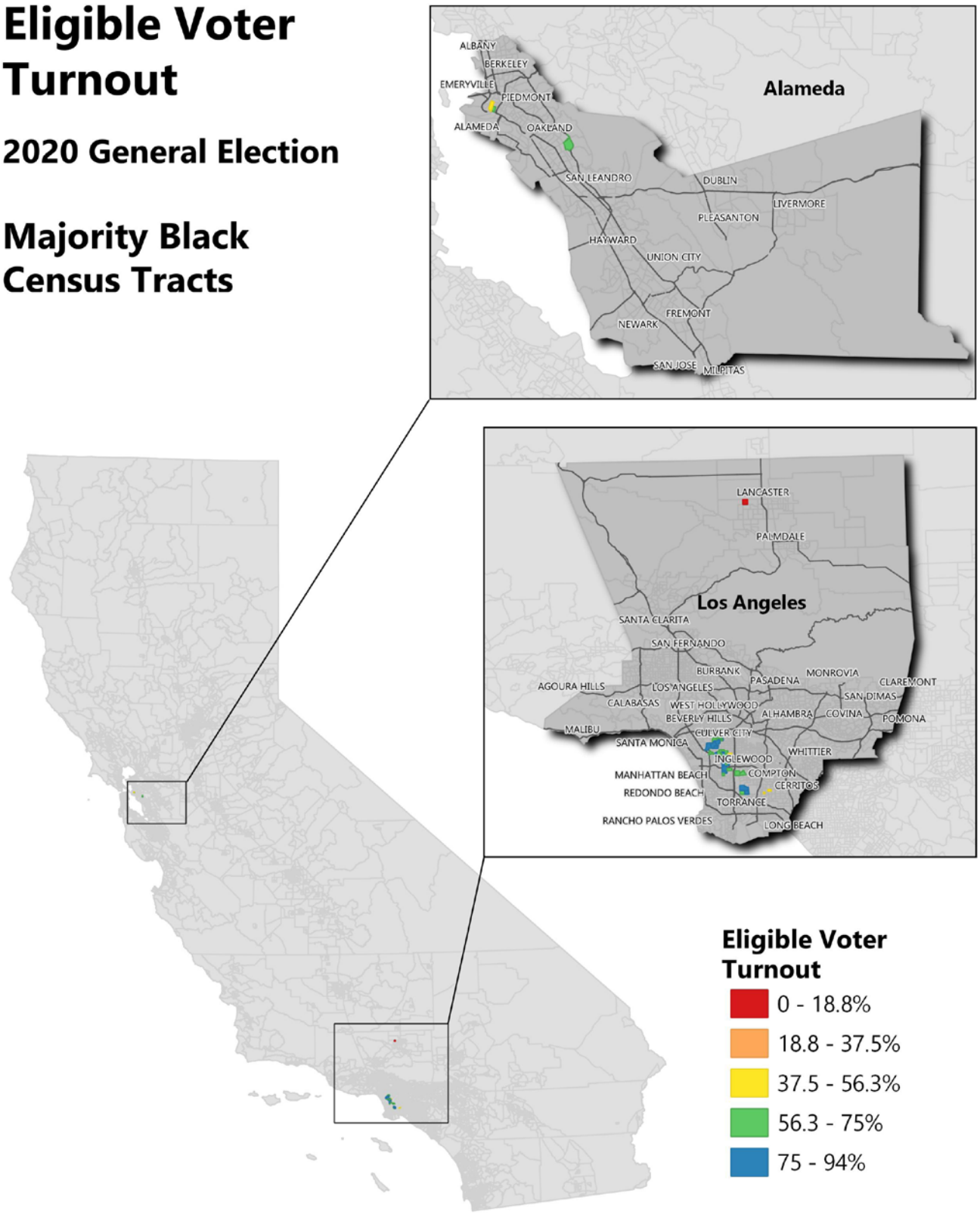
In Los Angeles County, census tracts with a Black plurality were concentrated in South Los Angeles in Inglewood, Culver City, and Compton. Eligible voter turnout varied in all areas. In Sacramento County, census tracts with a Black plurality were concentrated in Folsom and Sacramento, all of which had low eligible voter turnout rates. In the San Francisco Bay area, census tracts with a Black plurality were concentrated in Oakland, Richmond, and San Francisco. Eligible voter turnout in West Oakland was lower than eligible voter turnout than San Francisco and more inland Oakland.

FIGURE 6

Eligible Voter Turnout

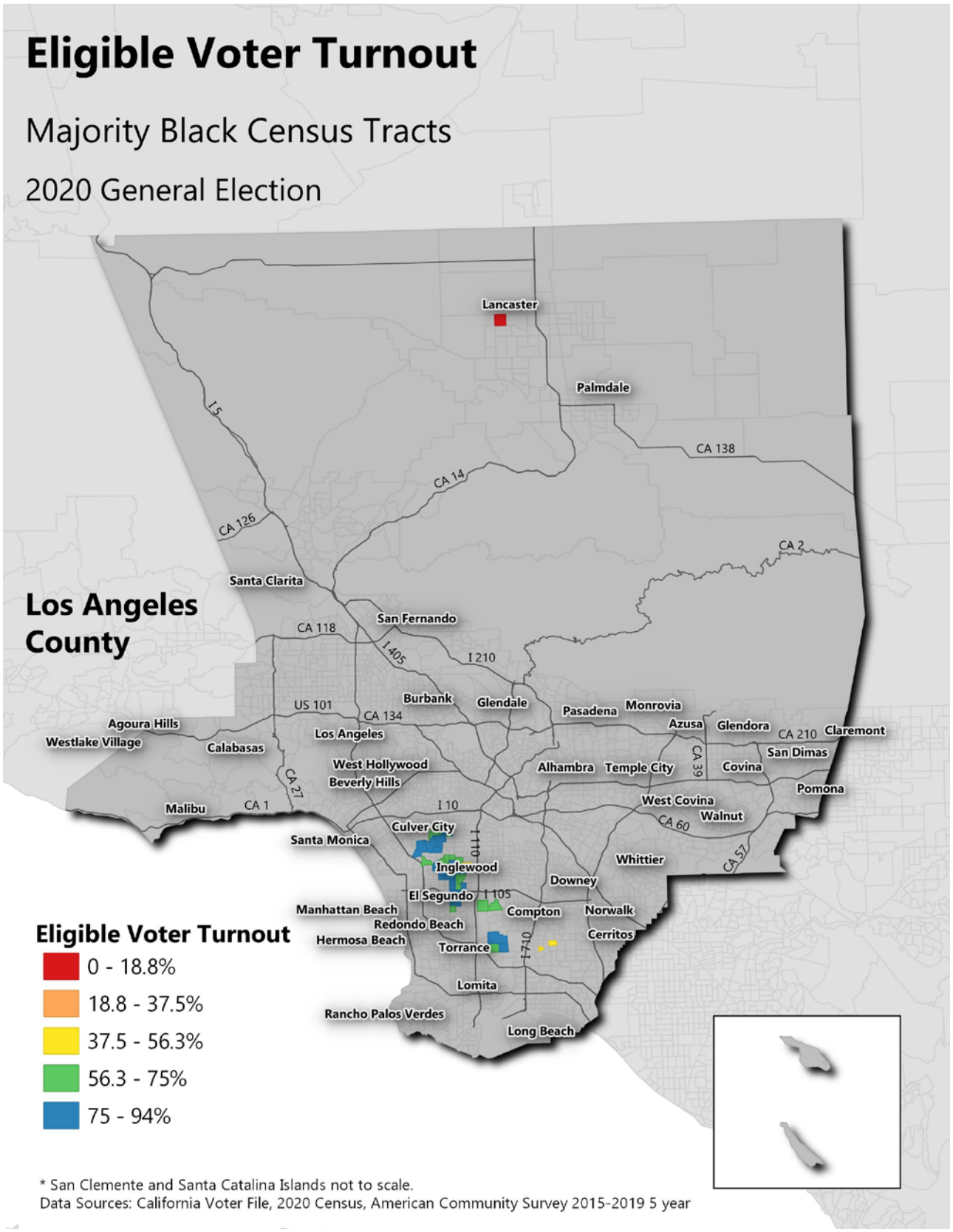
2020 General Election

Majority Black Census Tracts



Data Sources: California Voter File, 2020 Census, American Community Survey 2015-2019 5 year

FIGURE 7



* San Clemente and Santa Catalina Islands not to scale.
Data Sources: California Voter File, 2020 Census, American Community Survey 2015-2019 5 year

FIGURE 8

Eligible Voter Turnout

Majority Black Census Tracts

2020 General Election

South Los Angeles

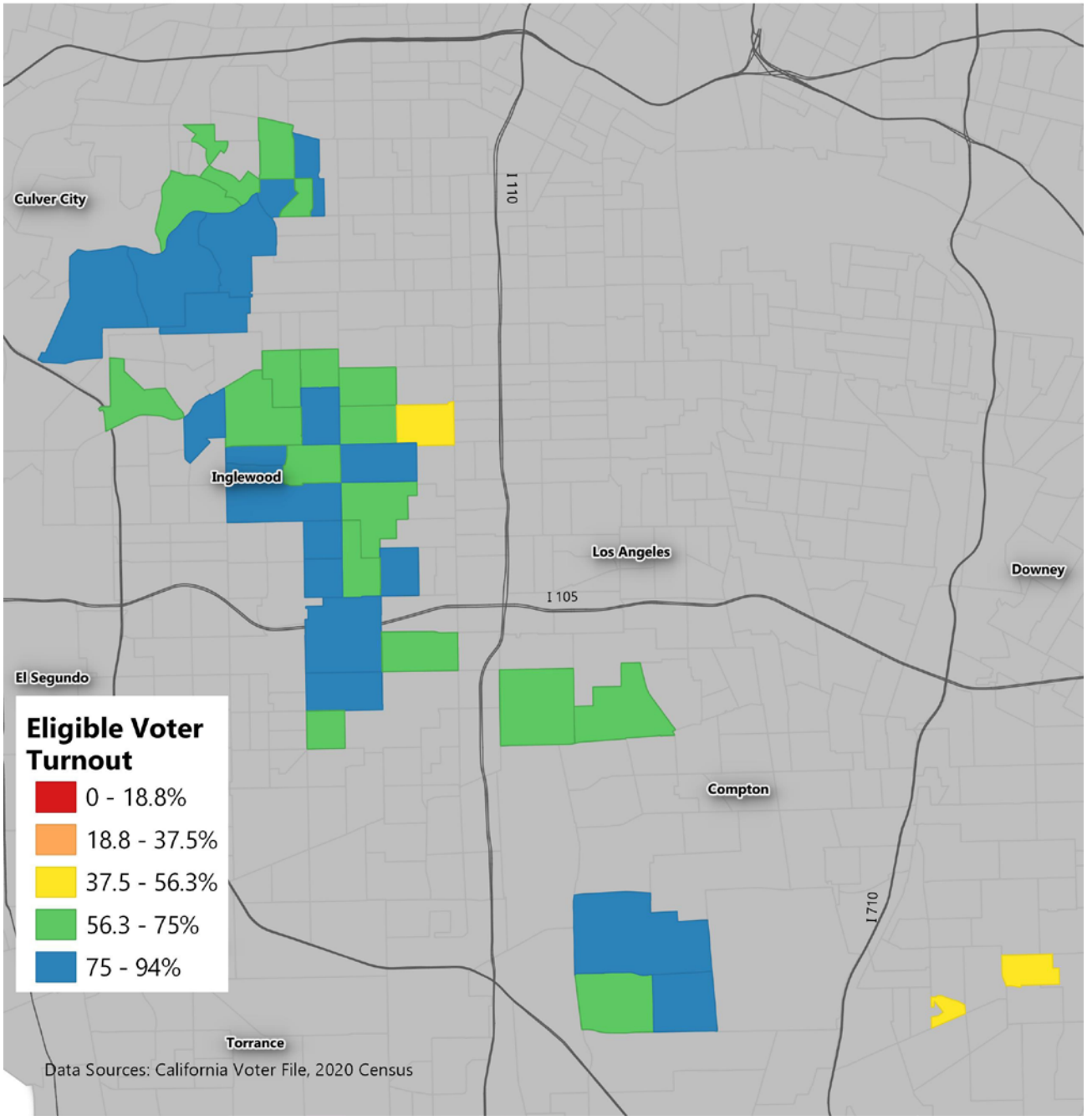
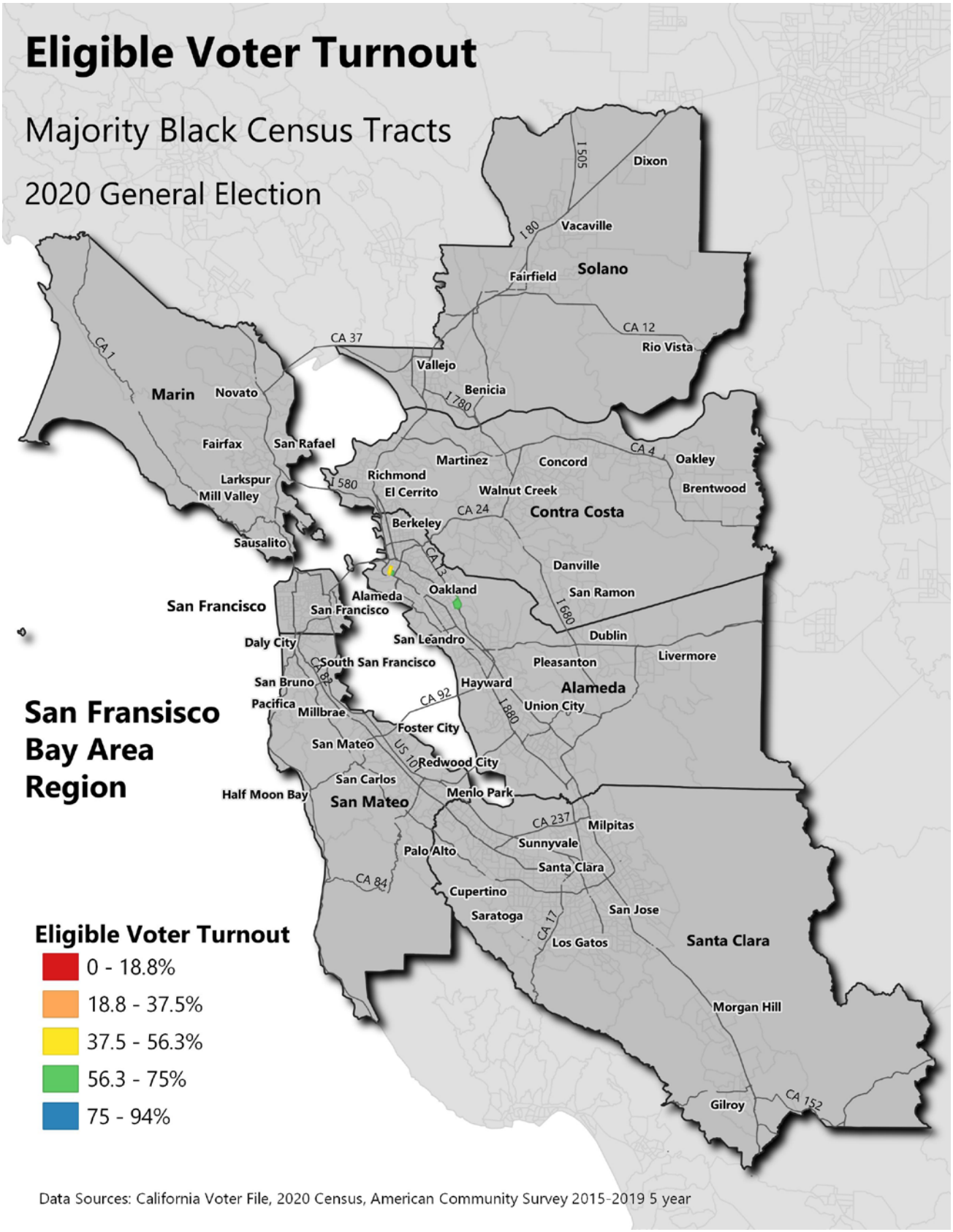


FIGURE 9



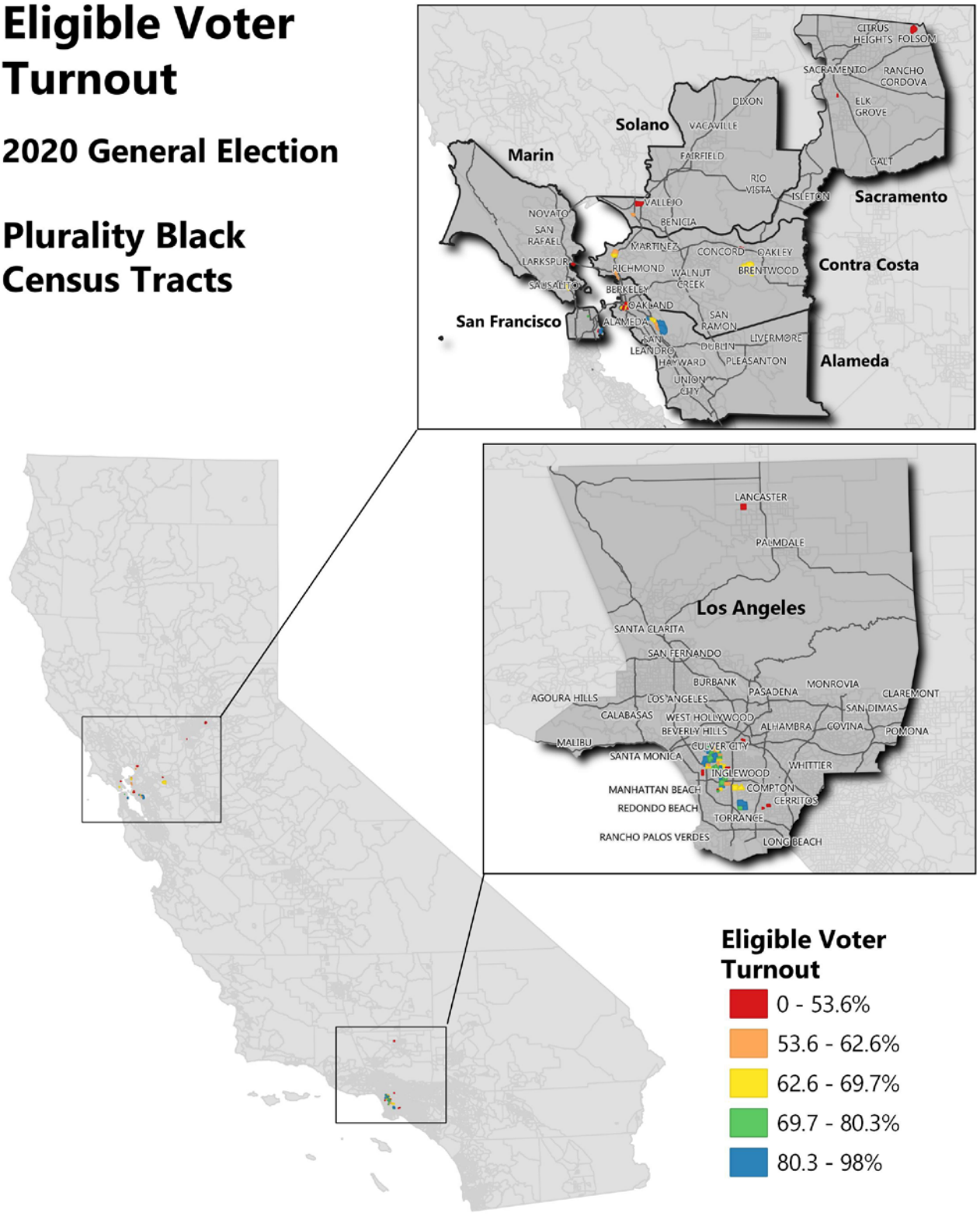
Data Sources: California Voter File, 2020 Census, American Community Survey 2015-2019 5 year

FIGURE 10

Eligible Voter Turnout

2020 General Election

Plurality Black Census Tracts



Data Sources: California Voter File, 2020 Census, American Community Survey 2015-2019 5 year

FIGURE 11

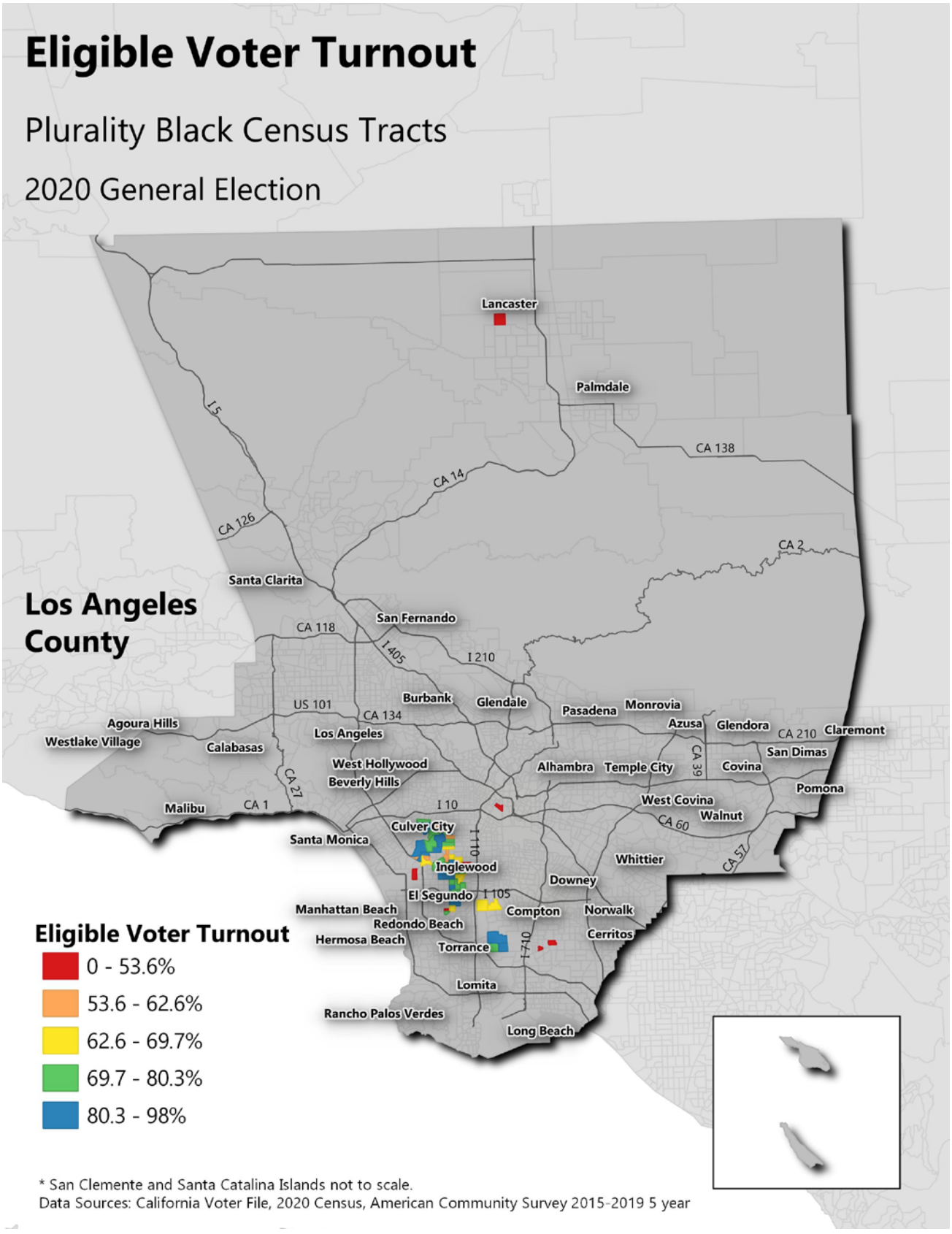

Eligible Voter Turnout
Plurality Black Census Tracts
2020 General Election
Los Angeles County
Lancaster
Palmdale
Santa Clarita
San Fernando
Burbank
Glendale
Pasadena
Monrovia
Azusa
Glendora
Claremont
San Dimas
Covina
Pomona
West Covina
Walnut
Whittier
Downey
Norwalk
Cerritos
Compton
Alhambra
Temple City
Agoura Hills
Westlake Village
Calabasas
Los Angeles
West Hollywood
Beverly Hills
Malibu
Santa Monica
Culver City
Inglewood
El Segundo
Manhattan Beach
Redondo Beach
Hermosa Beach
Torrance
Lomita
Rancho Palos Verdes
Long Beach
I 5
CA 14
CA 126
CA 138
CA 2
CA 118
I 405
I 210
US 101
CA 134
CA 210
CA 39
CA 27
CA 1
I 10
I 110
I 105
I 710
CA 60
CA 57
Eligible Voter Turnout
0 - 53.6%
53.6 - 62.6%
62.6 - 69.7%
69.7 - 80.3%
80.3 - 98%
* San Clemente and Santa Catalina Islands not to scale.
Data Sources: California Voter File, 2020 Census, American Community Survey 2015-2019 5 year

FIGURE 12

Eligible Voter Turnout

Plurality Black Census Tracts

2020 General Election

South Los Angeles

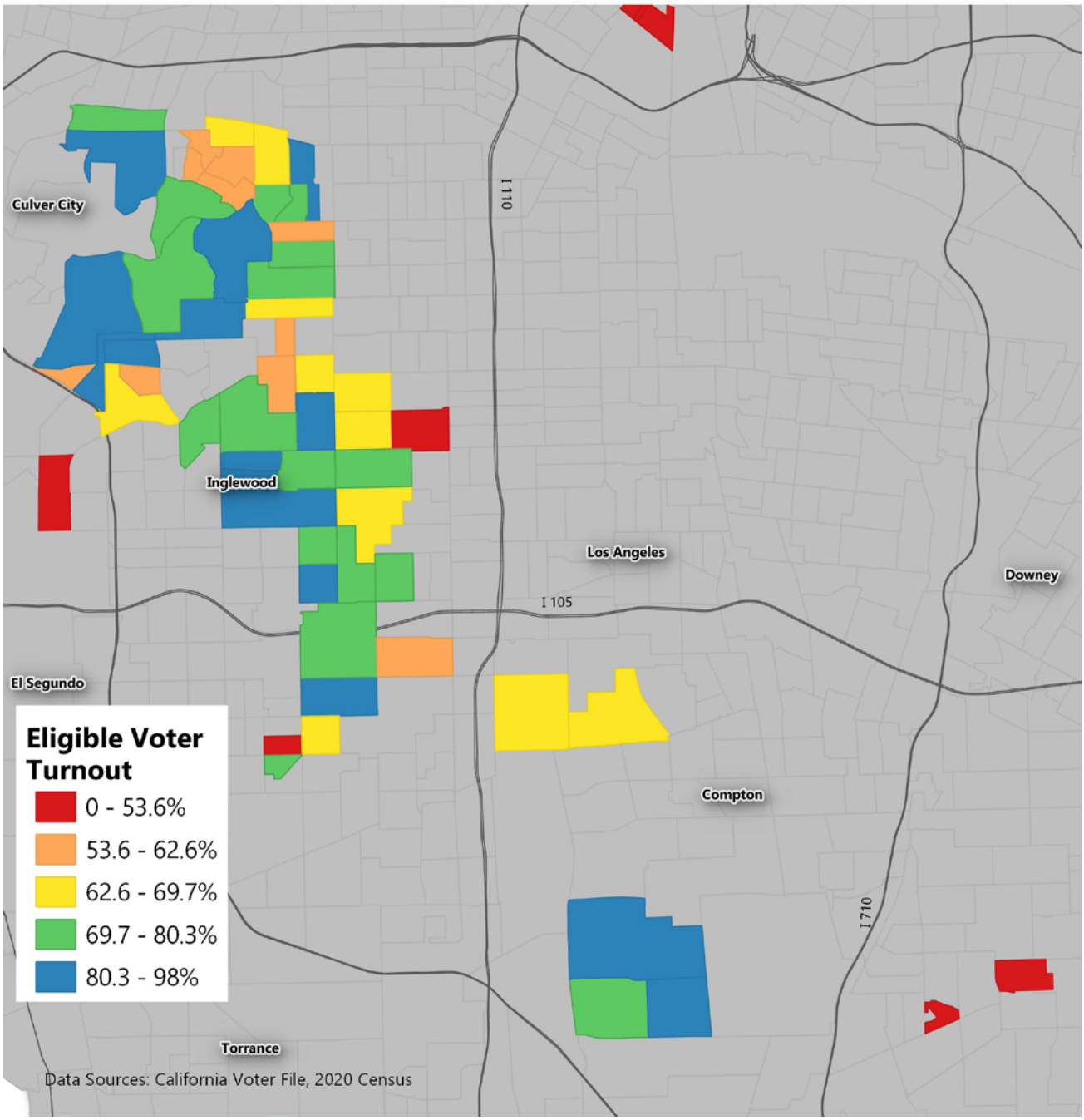


FIGURE 13

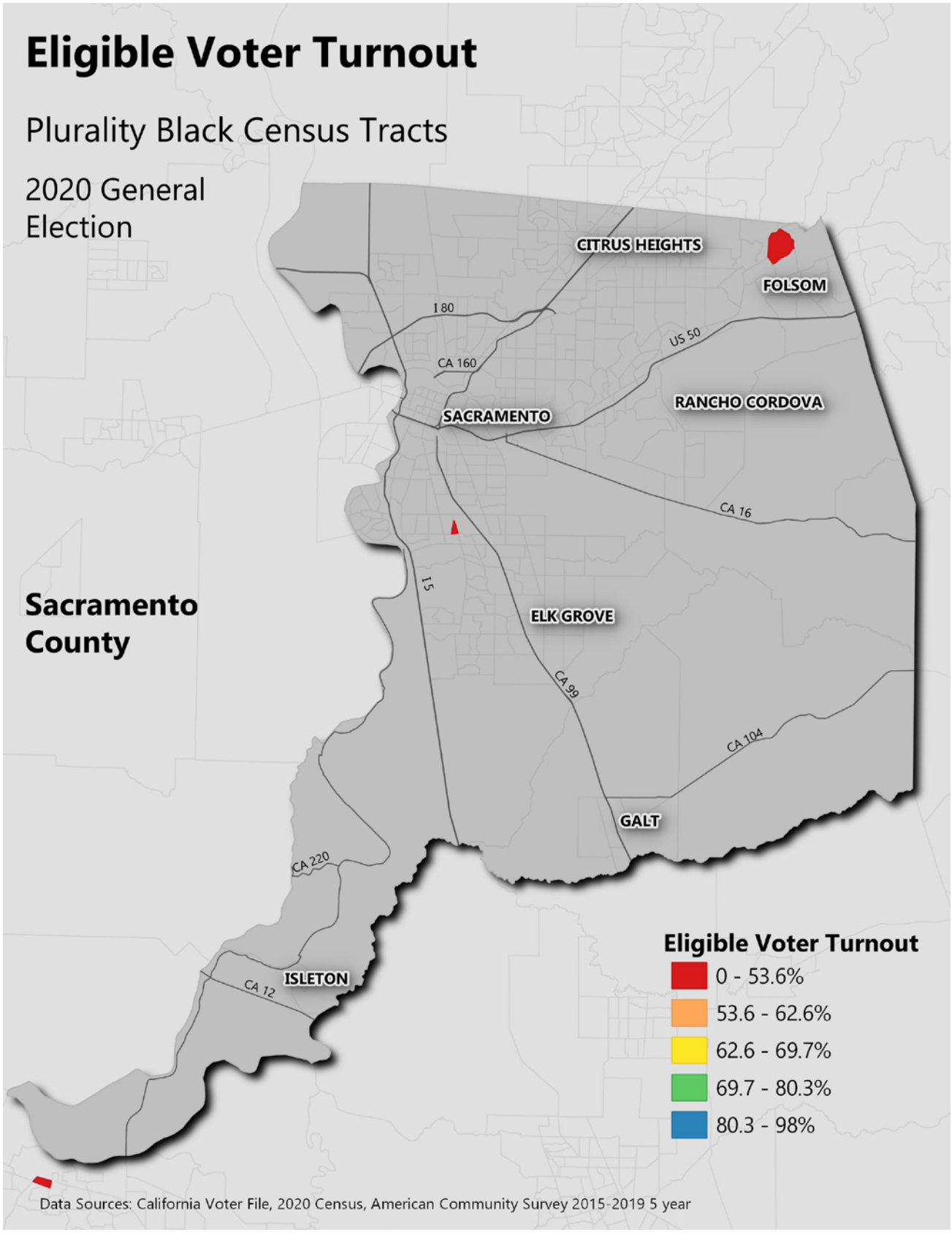
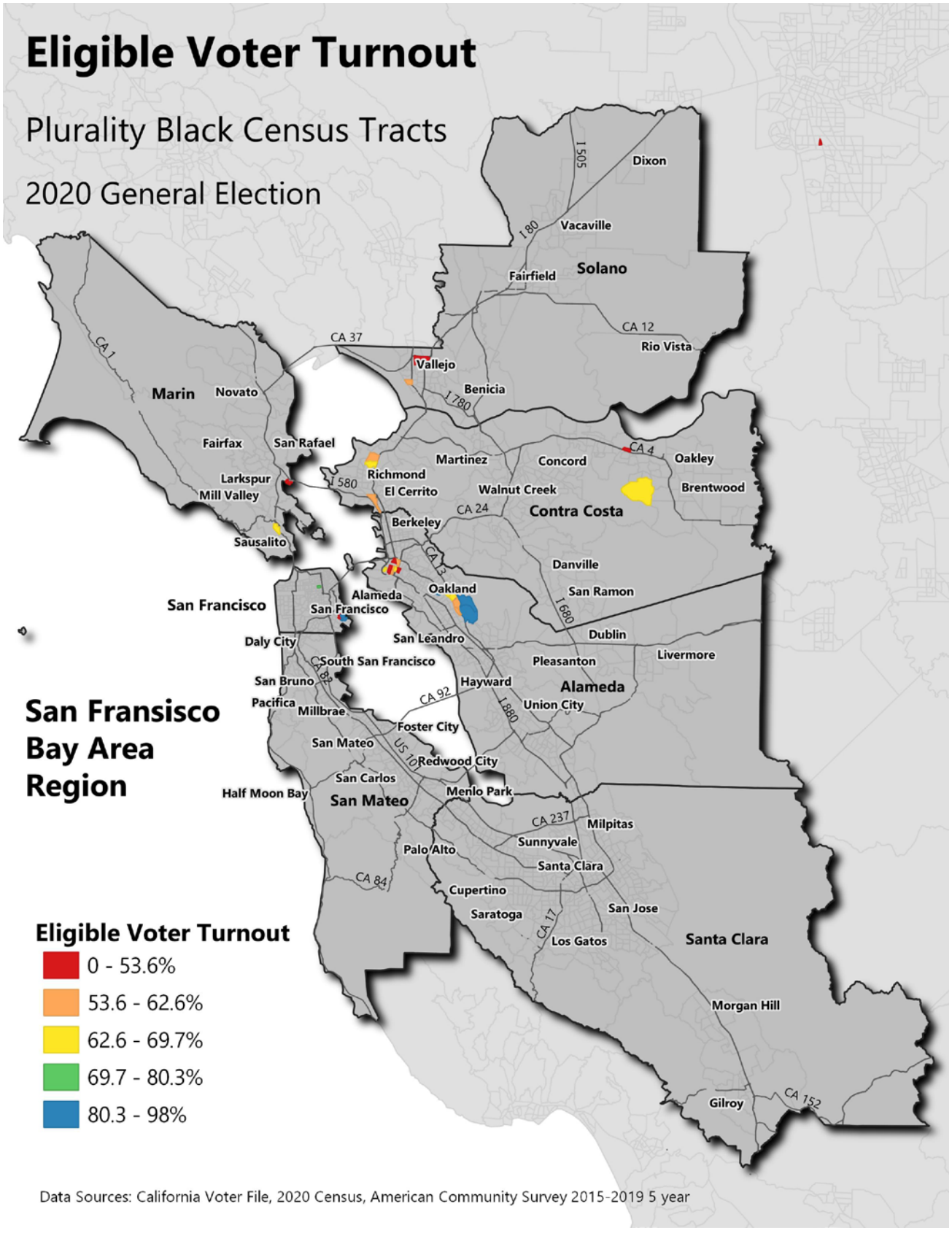

Eligible Voter Turnout
Plurality Black Census Tracts
2020 General Election
Sacramento County
CITRUS HEIGHTS
FOLSOM
I 80
US 50
CA 160
SACRAMENTO
RANCHO CORDOVA
CA 16
I5
ELK GROVE
CA 99
CA 104
GALT
CA 220
ISLETON
CA 12
Eligible Voter Turnout
0 - 53.6%
53.6 - 62.6%
62.6 - 69.7%
69.7 - 80.3%
80.3 - 98%
Data Sources: California Voter File, 2020 Census, American Community Survey 2015-2019 5 year

FIGURE 14



Data Sources: California Voter File, 2020 Census, American Community Survey 2015-2019 5 year

In order to place the turnout trends among Black communities discussed earlier in context, it is important to understand turnout trends in other communities throughout California. The following sections present turnout trends in white, non-Latino, majority Asian-American, and majority Latino census tracts for comparison.

Eligible Voter Turnout – All Voters in White, non-Latino Census Tracts

Table 5: Census Tract Eligible Voter Turnout Levels - White, non-Latino Census Tracts California 2020 General Election

	White Majority Census Tracts		White Plurality Census Tracts	
	w/ Low Eligible Voter Turnout	w/ High Eligible Voter Turnout	w/ Low Eligible Voter Turnout	w/ High Eligible Voter Turnout
Number of Census Tracts	238	1,332	385	1,630
Most Commonly Attained Education Level	Some College or Associate Degree	Bachelors Degree or Higher	Some College or Associate Degree	Bachelors Degree or Higher
Average Median Income	$56,838	$107,678	$54,080	$106,300

Data Source: Secretary of State Voter File, 2020 Decennial Census, American Community Survey 2015-2019 5 year

During the 2020 general election, there were 2,871 census tracts with white, non-Latino residents representing 50.0% or more of the population. Table 5 shows that among white, non-Latino majority census tracts, 238 had low eligible voter turnout and 1,332 had high eligible voter turnout in the 2020 general election (see Table 1 for definitions of low and high turnout). White, non-Latino majority census tracts with low eligible voter turnout had a lower median average income ($56,838) than those with high eligible voter turnout ($107,678) and lower most commonly attained education levels (some college or associate degree) than those with high eligible voter turnout (bachelor's degree or higher).

There were 4,079 census tracts in which the share of the population that was white, non-Latino was higher than any other race or ethnicity. Among census tracts with a white, non-Latino plurality, 385 had low eligible voter turnout and 1,630 had high eligible voter turnout. Census tracts with a white, non-Latino plurality and low eligible voter turnout had average median incomes of $54,080 and the most commonly attained education level was some college or an associate degree. Census tracts with a white, non-Latino plurality and high eligible voter turnout, had higher average incomes ($106,300) and most commonly attained education levels (bachelor's degree or higher).

Eligible Voter Turnout – All Voters in Asian-American Census Tracts

Table 6: Census Tract Eligible Voter Turnout Levels - Asian-American Census Tracts California 2020 General Election

	Asian-American Majority Census Tracts		Asian-American Plurality Census Tracts	
	w/ Low Eligible Voter Turnout	w/ High Eligible Voter Turnout	w/ Low Eligible Voter Turnout	w/ High Eligible Voter Turnout
Number of Census Tracts	54	93	110	168
Most Commonly Attained Education Level	Bachelors Degree or Higher	Bachelors Degree or Higher	Some College or Associate Degree	Bachelors Degree or Higher
Average Median Income	$56,968	$130,633	$54,790	$118,300

Data Source: Secretary of State Voter File, 2020 Decennial Census, American Community Survey 2015-2019 5 year

In 2020, there were 448 census tracts with Asian-American residents representing 50.0% or more of the population. Among Asian-American majority census tracts, 54 had low eligible voter turnout and 93 had high eligible voter turnout (Table 6). Census tracts with Asian-American majorities and low eligible voter turnout rates had the same most commonly attained education level as those with high eligible voter turnout (bachelor's degree or higher). Average median income in census tracts with low eligible voter turnout, however, were less than half the average median incomes in census tracts with high eligible voter turnout ($56,968 and $130,633, respectively).

There were 919 census tracts in which the share of the population that was Asian American was higher than any other race or ethnicity. In the 2020 general election, 110 census tracts with an Asian-American plurality had low eligible voter turnout and 168 had high eligible voter turnout. Census tracts with an Asian-American plurality and low eligible voter turnout had lower average median incomes ($54,790) than those with high eligible voter turnout ($118,300). Additionally, census tracts with an Asian-American plurality and low eligible voter turnout had lower most commonly attained education levels (some college or associate degree) than those with high eligible voter turnout (bachelor's degree or higher).

Eligible Voter Turnout – All Voters in Latino Census Tracts

Table 7: Census Tract Eligible Voter Turnout Levels - Latino Census Tracts California 2020 General Election				
	Latino Majority Census Tracts		Latino Plurality Census Tracts	
	w/ Low Eligible Voter Turnout	w/ High Eligible Voter Turnout	w/ Low Eligible Voter Turnout	w/ High Eligible Voter Turnout
Number of Census Tracts	1,047	78	1,254	138
Most Commonly Attained Education Level	Some High School	Some College or Associate Degree	Some High School	Some College or Associate Degree
Average Median Income	$40,519	$60,306	$40,863	$66,495

Data Source: Secretary of State Voter File, 2020 Decennial Census, American Community Survey 2015-2019 5 year

In 2020, there were 2,852 census tracts with Latino residents representing 50.0% or more of the population. Among those census tracts, 1,047 had low eligible voter turnout and 78 had high eligible voter turnout (Table 7). In Latino majority census tracts with low eligible voter turnout, the most commonly attained education level was some high school and the average median income was $40,519. In Latino majority census tracts with high eligible voter turnout, the most commonly attained education level was some college or associate degree, and the average median income was $60,306.

There were 3,832 census tracts in which the share of the population that was Latino was higher than any other race or ethnicity. In the 2020 general election, 1,254 census tracts with a Latino plurality had low eligible voter turnout and 138 census tracts with a Latino plurality had high eligible voter turnout. The most commonly attained education levels and average median incomes were higher in census tracts with high eligible voter turnout than those with low eligible voter turnout. Census tracts with a Latino plurality and low eligible voter turnout had most commonly attained education levels of some high school and an average median income of $40,863. Census tracts with a Latino plurality and high eligible voter turnout had most commonly attained education levels of some college or associate degree and an average median incomes of $66,495.

Research Question Two

What Methods of Voting Did Black Communities Use in the 2020 General Election?

Definition of Voting Methods Used in the 2020 General Election

Mail	A Vote-by-Mail ballot that was returned using the mail.
Voting Location Ballot Drop Off	A Vote-by-Mail ballot that was returned by dropping the ballot off at a polling place or vote center.
Drop Box Location	A Vote-by-Mail ballot that was returned by dropping the ballot off at a drop box location (includes drops boxes that were internally and externally located).
Voting Location	A ballot that was cast in person at a polling place or vote center.

In the 2020 general election, California voters had more options for casting their ballot than in prior elections. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, California expanded the use of vote-by-mail by requiring California's county elections offices to mail every active, registered Californian a vote-by-mail (VBM) ballot. Voters could choose to return their ballot through the mail, at a ballot drop box, or at an in-person voting location in their county. Voters could also choose to vote in person at a polling place or vote center.

Given the expansion of VBM access in the November 2020 election, policymakers and voter advocates alike have questioned how voters' behavior may have changed from previous elections and if new preferences will likely remain for future elections. It is critically important to understand how these policy changes affected both methods of voting and VBM rejection rates, especially among Black voters. The following section of the report presents findings on voting methods and VBM rejection rates for Black communities in California during the 2020 general election. For a discussion of voting method rates at the county and state level for a variety of voter groups, see CID report, California's Changing Electorate: a 2020 Post Election Analysis of Voting Behavior.[16]

In the following section, we first examine voting method and rejection rates for Black voters within Black majority census tracts. Black majority census tracts have Black populations large enough to reliably identify Black voters through surname matching and geocoding of all groups. Due to data limitations, as discussed in this report's methodology section, identifying Black voters is difficult in census tracts that do not have proportionally large Black populations. We then discuss findings for all resident voters in Black communities, measured as both Black majority and Black plurality census tracts. By analyzing data for of all voters within these census tracts, we are able to understand communities' voting behavior as a whole and better understand the overall level of political engagement. We then present findings for Asian-American, Latino, and white, non-Latino communities in California.

We note here that the following discussion of voting methods and VBM rejection rates in Black communities only represents trends in these specific communities. Since voting methods and VBM rejection rates likely vary in different communities across the state, any observations found in this section are not intended to reflect trends for Black voters throughout California, particularly those living in communities with low proportions of Black residents.

Voting Methods – All Census Tracts

Table 8: Voting Methods - All Census Tracts
California 2020 General Election

Vote Method	In Person at a Vote Center or Polling Place	Mail	Drop Box	Drop Off at Vote Center or Polling Place	No Data
Percent Method	12.5%	33.0%	37.2%	16.2%	1.2%

Data Source: Secretary of State Voter File, 2020 Decennial Census

In the 2020 general election, voters returned their VBM ballots at drop boxes at higher rates than any other voting method (Table 8). Sending VBM ballots through the mail was the second most used voting method. Over 37% of all ballots cast were returned to a drop box and 33.0% were returned through the mail. Another 16.2% of voters returned their VBM ballots to a vote center or polling place, while 12.5% of voters voted in person at a vote center or polling place.

Voting Methods – Black Voters in Majority Census Tracts

Table 9: Voting Methods - Black Voters
Black Majority Census Tracts
California 2020 General Election

Vote Method	In Person at a Vote Center or Polling Place	Mail	Drop Box	Drop Off at Vote Center or Polling Place
Percent Method	17.9%	26.3%	35.2%	20.6%

Data Source: Secretary of State Voter File, 2020 Decennial Census

Black voters in Black majority census tracts voted in person and via drop box at lower rates than all voters in Black majority census tracts (Table 9). Just under 18% of Black voters in Black majority census tracts voted in person, compared to 18.5% of all voters in the same census tracts (Table 10). Drop box use was slightly lower among Black voters (35.2%) compared to the general population (35.4%).

Black voters in Black majority census tracts voted through the mail and by vote center or polling place drop off at slightly higher rates than the general population. Over 26% of Black voters sent their VBM ballot through the mail, compared to 25.9% of all voters. Polling place and vote center drop off rates were slightly higher among Black voters (20.6%) in Black majority census tracts than all voters (20.2%) in the same census tracts.

Voting Methods – All Voters in Black Majority Census Tracts

Table 10: Voting Methods - Black Majority Census Tracts
California 2020 General Election

Vote Method	In Person at a Vote Center or Polling Place	Mail	Drop Box	Drop Off at Vote Center or Polling Place
Percent Method	18.5%	25.9%	35.4%	20.2%

Data Source: Secretary of State Voter File, 2020 Decennial Census

All voters living in Black majority census tracts voted in person and returned their VBM ballots at a vote center or polling place at higher rates than all California census tracts combined (Table 10). Conversely, voters living in Black majority census tracts voted via drop box and the mail at lower rates than census tracts overall. In Black majority census tracts, 35.4% of all voters voted via drop box, compared to 37.2% of voters in all census tracts. Nearly 26% of all voters in Black majority census tracts returned their VBM ballot through the mail, notably lower than voters in all census tracts (33.0%). Just over 20% of all voters in Black majority census tracts returned a VBM ballot to a vote center or polling place, 4.0 percentage points higher than voters in all census tracts (16.2%). Over 18% of all voters in Black majority census tracts voted in person at a vote center or polling place, while 12.5% of voters in all census tracts did the same.

Voting Methods – All Voters in Black Plurality Census Tracts

Table 11: Voting Methods - Black Plurality Census Tracts
California 2020 General Election

Vote Method	In Person at a Vote Center or Polling Place	Mail	Drop Box	Drop Off at Vote Center or Polling Place
Percent Method	16.2%	28.6%	35.9%	19.2%

Data Source: Secretary of State Voter File, 2020 Decennial Census

Voters living in census tracts with a Black plurality voted by mail and drop box at lower rates than voters in all census

tracts (Table 11). Conversely, voters living in census tracts with a Black plurality voted in person at a vote center or polling place and by returning their VBM ballot to a vote center or polling place at higher rates than voters in all census tracts. Over 16% of all voters living in Black plurality census tracts voted in person, at a vote center or polling place, compared to 12.5% of voters in all census tracts. More than 19% of voters living in Black plurality census tracts voted by returning their VBM ballot to a vote center or polling place compared to 16.2% of voters in all census tracts. Nearly 29% of all voters living in Black plurality census tracts voted by mail and 35.9% voted via drop box, both below the rates for voters in all census tracts (33.0% and 37.2%, respectively).

VBM Rejection Rates – All Census Tracts

Table 12: VBM Rejection Rates - All Census Tracts
California 2020 General Election

Total VBM Ballots Cast (Accepted and Rejected)	VBM Ballots Rejected	VBM Rejection Rate
14,793,619	78,219	0.5%

Data Source: Secretary of State Voter File, 2020 Decennial Census

California's 2020 general election was the first election in the state to automatically mail all registered voters a VBM ballot. A half of one percent of all mail ballots cast in the state were rejected with rejection rates higher for some voter groups. In the 2020 general election, 14,793,619 VBM ballots were cast (accepted and rejected) in all California census tracts. Of those, 0.5% were rejected (78,219 VBM ballots).

VBM Rejection Rates – Black Voters in Majority Census Tracts

Table 13: VBM Rejection Rates - Black Voters - Black Majority Census Tracts
California 2020 General Election

Total VBM Ballots Cast (Accepted and Rejected)	VBM Ballots Rejected	VBM Rejection Rate
59,894	376	0.6%

Data Source: Secretary of State Voter File, 2020 Decennial Census

Black voters in Black majority census tracts had the same VBM rejection rates as all voters (0.6%) in Black majority census tracts, while both groups had slightly higher VBM rejection rates than all voters in all census tracts (0.5%) (Table 13). Of the 59,894 VBM ballots cast (accepted and rejected) by Black voters in Black majority census tracts, 376 were rejected.

VBM Rejection Rates – All Voters in Black Majority Census Tracts

Table 14: VBM Rejection Rates - Black Majority Census Tracts
California 2020 General Election

Total VBM Ballots Cast (Accepted and Rejected)	VBM Ballots Rejected	VBM Rejection Rate
76,495	491	0.6%

Data Source: Secretary of State Voter File, 2020 Decennial Census

All voters living in Black majority census tracts had slightly higher VBM rejection rates than voters in all census tracts. Of the 76,495 VBM ballots cast in Black majority census tracts, 0.6% (491 VBM ballots) were rejected (Table 14).

VBM Rejection Rates – All Voters in Black Plurality Census Tracts

Table 15: VBM Rejection Rates - Black Plurality Census Tracts California 2020 General Election		
Total VBM Ballots Cast (Accepted and Rejected)	**VBM Ballots Rejected**	**VBM Rejection Rate**
134,622	837	0.6%

Data Source: Secretary of State Voter File, 2020 Decennial Census

All voters living in Black plurality census tracts had slightly higher VBM rejection rates than voters in all census tracts (Table 15). Of the 134,622 VBM ballots cast in Black plurality census tracts, 0.6% (837 VBM ballots) were rejected. The rejection rate in Black plurality census tracts matched the rejection rates in Black majority census tracts.

Research Question Three

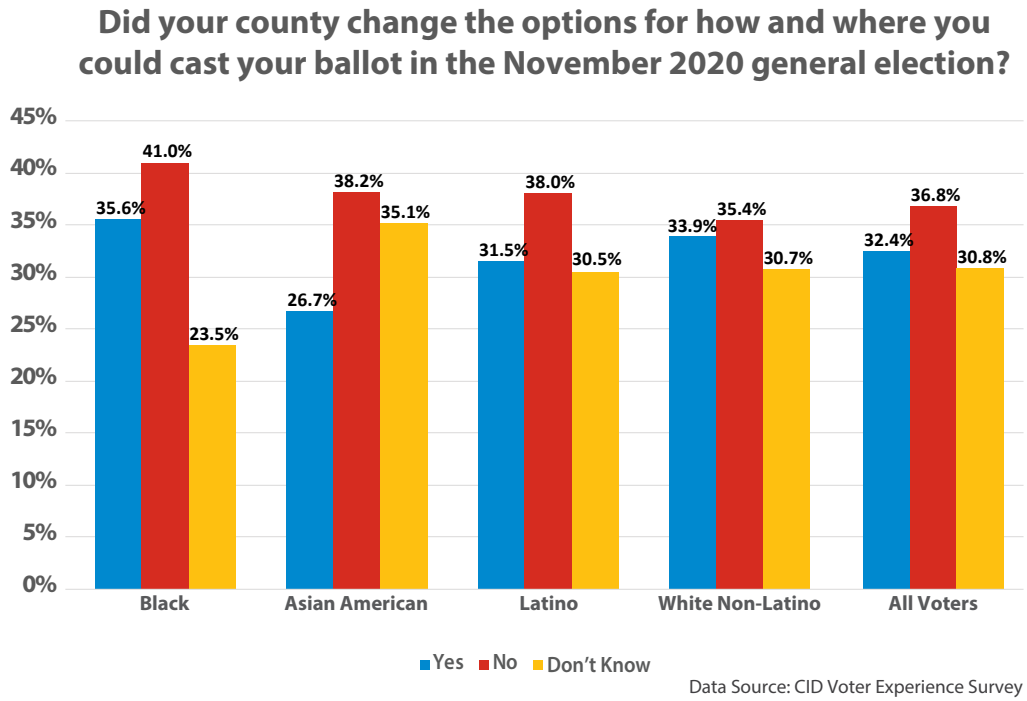
What are the Sources of Election Information for Black Voters and What are Their Preferences for How They Cast Their Ballots?

In order to better understand the experiences of Black voters in the 2020 general election and their preferences for future elections, we conducted a representative survey examining the experiences of eligible voters (adult citizens) in California. The survey was designed to glean insights about where Black voters acquired their information about voting, why they chose specific voting methods, transportation methods to voting locations, and voting preferences for future elections. In the following section of this report, we present survey responses for the overall eligible voter population broken out for eligible Black voters, as well as Latino, Asian-American, and white, non-Latino eligible voters. Due to Los Angeles County's large proportion of the total number of California's voters (roughly a quarter) in the 2020 general election, we also present data in this report for Los Angeles County alone. We note here that we do not have data that allows us to identify a direct relationship between voters' surveyed experiences and the specific outreach efforts of counties or other groups. For survey findings by age group (for the total population) and for eligible voters with disabilities, please see CID's report, California Changing Electorate: A 2020 Post Election Analysis of Voting Behavior.

1. Did your county change the options for how and where you could cast your ballot in the November 2020 general election?

We asked survey respondents if they knew whether their county had changed the options for how and where they could cast their ballot in the November 2020 general election. Figure 15 shows that just over a third of Black eligible voters (35.6%) reported knowing that their county had made changes in the 2020 general election for how and where voters could cast a ballot. This was the highest percentage for the racial and ethnic groups examined in this survey. Comparatively smaller percentages of Asian-American (26.7%), Latino (31.5%), and white, non-Latino (33.9%) eligible voters reported knowing this information. However, Black eligible voters also registered the highest "no" response of all racial and ethnic voting groups – 41.0% said their counties did not make voting changes. This lack of awareness of the changes that were made to the voting process in California counties highlights the ongoing need for additional outreach efforts designed to effectively reach Black voters, along with the electorate more broadly.

FIGURE 15



Los Angeles County

Awareness of voting changes in the 2020 general election was higher in Los Angeles County for all racial and ethnic groups that CID examined compared to these groups at the state level. Table 16 shows that a a somewhat greater percentage of Black eligible voters in Los Angeles County knew about voting changes compared to Black eligible voters statewide – 38.5% and 35.6%, respectively. Low percentages of voter awareness were also reported for Latino eligible voters (38.0%) and Asian-American eligible voters (32.2%). In contrast, about half (50.3%) of white, non-Latino eligible voters in Los Angeles County reported knowing about voting changes, the only racial or ethnic group with a majority aware of voting changes.

Table 16: Did your county change the options for how and where you could cast your ballot in the November 2020 general election? Los Angeles County

	Black	Asian American	Latino	White Non-Latino	All Voters
Yes	38.5%	32.2%	38.0%	50.3%	42.2%
No	40.3%	35.9%	36.4%	28.3%	33.3%
Don't Know	21.2%	31.9%	25.6%	21.4%	24.5%

Data Source: CID Voter Experience Survey

2. How did you hear about the new voting options in your county in the November 2020 general election?

CID asked eligible voters who had reported knowing that their county had changed voting options how they had heard about the changes during the 2020 general election. Respondents could choose one or more sources from a list of relevant options with some respondents indicating more than one information source. Table 17 shows that the most common way that Black eligible voters learned of voting changes in their county was through social media (38.7%) and traditional media (newspaper or television) (35.5%), methods that were similar to voters statewide. Black eligible voters also heard about new voting options from political candidates/campaigns (33.2%), community groups (24.6%), text message (14.5%), email (16.0%), or phone call (8.6%). Each of these methods informed Black eligible voters at higher rates than other racial or ethnic groups. Conversely, Black eligible voters learned about new voting methods from county elections offices (22.3%), friends or family (28.5%), or a flyer in the mail (20.7%) at lower rates than other racial or ethnic groups.

Table 17: How did you hear about the new voting options in your county in the November 2020 general election? Statewide

	Black	Asian American	Latino	White Non-Latino	All Voters
Political campaigns/candidates	33.2%	22.9%	28.3%	29.5%	28.7%
Community groups	24.6%	19.3%	21.1%	19.4%	20.2%
My county elections office	22.3%	24.6%	22.3%	32.2%	27.7%
Media (newspapers or television news)	35.5%	38.5%	34.9%	42.8%	39.5%
Social media	38.7%	39.9%	41.2%	29.3%	34.5%
Friends or family	28.5%	35.1%	30.4%	29.3%	30.1%
Flyer in the mail	20.7%	24.6%	25.6%	27.2%	26.1%
Billboard	7.8%	7.9%	7.3%	7.3%	7.4%
Text message	14.5%	8.2%	10.8%	8.8%	9.7%
Email	16.0%	13.0%	10.9%	13.8%	13.0%
Phone call	8.6%	4.2%	5.1%	4.1%	4.8%
Not sure from whom	0.8%	4.2%	3.2%	5.2%	4.2%

Data Source: CID Voter Experience Survey

Los Angeles County

Table 18 shows that the most common information source for Black eligible voters in Los Angeles County was newspapers or television news (41.9%) followed by social media (41.0%). A greater percentage of Black Los Angeles County eligible voters (37.1%) reported learning that their county had made voting changes from political campaigns/candidates than Asian-American (24.1%) or Latino (26.5%) eligible voters. Social media was the top source of voting information for both Asian American (44.6%) and Latino (41.2%) eligible voters; and traditional media was the top choice for white, non-Latino eligible voters (44.4%).

Table 18: How did you hear about the new voting options in your county in the November 2020 general election? Los Angeles County

	Black	Asian American	Latino	White Non-Latino	All Voters
Political campaigns/candidates	37.1%	24.1%	26.5%	38.0%	32.8%
Community groups	22.9%	15.2%	19.2%	24.3%	21.5%
My county elections office	23.8%	14.3%	23.0%	33.7%	27.2%
Media (newspapers or television news)	41.9%	40.2%	33.9%	44.4%	40.6%
Social media	41.0%	44.6%	41.2%	38.4%	40.3%
Friends or family	31.4%	31.3%	27.8%	32.1%	30.5%
Flyer in the mail	23.8%	28.6%	23.6%	26.5%	26.0%
Billboard	9.5%	9.8%	6.7%	9.8%	9.0%
Text message	18.1%	8.9%	12.1%	11.2%	12.0%
Email	19.0%	14.3%	10.5%	16.1%	14.7%
Phone call	17.1%	2.7%	4.5%	5.8%	6.2%
Not sure from whom	1.0%	3.6%	2.6%	3.8%	3.1%

Data Source: CID Voter Experience Survey

3. How did you specifically learn about the in-person location where you voted or dropped off your vote-by-mail ballot?

We asked survey respondents how they heard about in-person voting locations for the November 2020 general election. Respondents could choose all that apply from a list of relevant options with some respondents indicating more than one information source. As shown in Table 19, the top information sources for Black voters in the 2020 general election were materials produced from county elections offices including county information guides (31.3%), county websites (28.4%), and their VBM packets (32.1%). These were also the top choices of voters overall, although higher percentages of Black voters reported learning about in-person voting locations from their county voter information guide and their VBM packets than both Asian-American and Latino voters. Additionally, 15.2% of Black voters – the highest percentage of any racial/ethnic group – reported social media as their information source.

Table 19: How did you specifically learn about the in-person location where you voted or dropped off your vote-by-mail ballot? Statewide

	Black	Asian American	Latino	White Non-Latino	All Voters
County voter information guide	31.3%	28.7%	29.5%	41.8%	36.3%
County website	28.4%	32.2%	28.6%	26.9%	28.3%
Vote-by-mail packet	32.1%	28.1%	27.3%	27.5%	27.8%
Called my county elections office	6.2%	3.8%	7.5%	7.1%	6.7%
Advertisements in the media	12.3%	7.3%	9.5%	11.3%	10.3%
Social media	15.2%	12.6%	13.3%	14.0%	13.6%
Called by a community group	3.7%	3.5%	4.0%	5.8%	4.8%
Texted by a community group	9.1%	3.2%	4.2%	4.8%	4.8%
Emailed by a community group	7.0%	2.3%	4.5%	6.0%	5.2%
Visited by a community group	5.8%	3.2%	2.5%	4.2%	3.7%
Poster at old polling place	5.3%	2.3%	3.9%	4.0%	4.0%
Friends or family	11.1%	9.9%	15.2%	11.4%	12.3%
Saw signage outside location	2.9%	7.9%	7.3%	7.7%	7.3%
Other	1.6%	1.2%	2.1%	3.4%	2.7%

Data Source: CID Voter Experience Survey

Los Angeles County

As with voters statewide, the top sources of voting location information in Los Angeles County were official county-created materials (voter information guides, county websites, and VBM packets). Black voters in Los Angeles County identified the county voter information guide as their voting location information source at a higher rate (35.6%) than both Asian-American (21.8%) and Latino (30.0%) voters (Table 20). Black voters were also much more likely to report being texted or visited in person by a community group than Asian-American, Latino, or white, non-Latino eligible voters, but the least likely group to report being called by community groups.

Table 20: How did you specifically learn about the in-person location where you voted or dropped off your vote-by-mail ballot? Los Angeles County

	Black	Asian American	Latino	White Non-Latino	All Voters
County voter information guide	35.6%	21.8%	30.0%	41.6%	35.6%
County website	31.7%	31.0%	28.5%	31.2%	30.7%
Vote-by-mail packet	27.7%	31.0%	26.3%	26.5%	27.1%
Called my county elections office	9.9%	5.7%	8.5%	9.8%	8.9%
Advertisements in the media	13.9%	9.2%	10.4%	16.5%	13.4%
Social media online	15.8%	12.6%	13.7%	21.2%	17.2%
Called by a community group	3.0%	3.4%	3.3%	8.8%	5.9%
Texted by a community group	12.9%	4.6%	4.8%	9.8%	8.1%
Emailed by a community group	7.9%	2.3%	4.8%	9.3%	7.0%
Visited by a community group	8.9%	1.1%	2.2%	7.9%	5.5%
Poster at old polling place	4.0%	2.3%	4.1%	4.4%	4.1%
Friends or family	12.9%	4.6%	14.8%	11.9%	12.2%
Saw signage outside location	3.0%	8.0%	5.9%	5.8%	5.9%
Other	2.0%	1.1%	1.9%	1.4%	1.7%

Data Source: CID Voter Experience Survey

4. How did you get to the in-person voting location where you voted or dropped off your vote-by-mail ballot in the 2020 general election?

We asked voters how they traveled to a voting location in the 2020 general election, either to vote in person or to drop off their VBM ballot. The most common mode of transportation to a voting location in the 2020 general election varied by the race and ethnicity of voters (Table 21). A smaller proportion of Black voters (64.2%) drove to their voting location compared to Asian-American (70.8%), Latino (73.0%), and white, non-Latino (70.3%) voters. Notably, 10.3% of Black voters took public transportation to their 2020 voting location, a much higher rate than voters overall (5.6%).

Table 21: How did you get to the in-person voting location where you voted or dropped off your vote-by-mail ballot in the November 2020 general election? Statewide

	Black	Asian American	Latino	White Non-Latino	All Voters
Walked/bicycled	14.8%	15.5%	10.1%	15.3%	13.9%
Drove	64.2%	70.8%	73.0%	70.3%	70.5%
Got a ride/Uber/Lyft	8.2%	8.8%	10.3%	6.9%	8.1%
Public transit	10.3%	4.1%	5.4%	5.4%	5.6%
Paratransit	1.6%	0.9%	0.7%	0.4%	0.7%
Other	0.8%	0.0%	0.5%	1.7%	1.2%

Data Source: CID Voter Experience Survey

Los Angeles County

Table 22 shows that, as a whole, Los Angeles County voters drove to a voting location at lower rates (63.8%) than voters in the state overall (70.5%), however Black voters drove at higher rates in Los Angeles (68.3%) compared to Black voters statewide (64.2%). At 2.0%, Black eligible voters in Los Angeles County used paratransit (transportation services that supplement fixed-route mass transit by providing individualized rides without fixed routes or timetables) at more than twice the rate as Los Angeles County voters overall (0.9%).

Table 22: How did you get to the in-person voting location where you voted or dropped off your vote-by-mail ballot in the November 2020 general election? Los Angeles County

	Black	Asian American	Latino	White Non-Latino	All Voters
Walked/bicycled	15.8%	14.9%	12.6%	18.4%	16.2%
Drove	68.3%	67.8%	70.0%	58.8%	63.8%
Got a ride/Uber/Lyft	6.9%	13.8%	12.6%	12.8%	12.0%
Public transit	5.9%	3.4%	3.0%	8.1%	6.1%
Paratransit	2.0%	0.0%	0.7%	0.7%	0.9%
Other	1.0%	0.0%	1.1%	1.2%	1.0%

Data Source: CID Voter Experience Survey

5. Why did you vote in person at a voting location in the 2020 general election?

We asked voters why they voted at an in-person location in the general election. Respondents could choose multiple options. Table 23 shows wanting an "I Voted" sticker was the top reason for voting in person for Black voters (33.8%), as well as Latino (31.9%) and Asian-American (34.6%) voters, while white, non-Latino voters cited not trusting the mail to deliver their ballot (30.1%) as their top reason for voting in person. Nearly a quarter of Black voters said they wanted to be seen representing their community, a higher rate than Latinos (21.1%), Asian Americans (16.2%), and white, non-Latino (20.0%) voters. Almost 18% of Black voters identified the need to use an accessible voting machine and 14.0% reported needing to fill out a replacement ballot, the highest percentages of all voters of color examined.

Table 23: Why did you vote in person at a voting location in the November 2020 general election? Statewide

	Black	Asian American	Latino	White Non-Latino	All Voters
To receive language assistance	12.7%	8.4%	8.0%	13.7%	11.3%
To use an accessible voting machine for voters with disabilities	17.8%	12.3%	10.6%	14.6%	13.3%
To register to vote or update an existing registration record	21.0%	20.7%	19.9%	24.3%	22.2%
To fill out a replacement ballot for the one I received in the mail	14.0%	12.3%	9.6%	16.1%	13.7%
To receive an "I Voted" sticker	33.8%	34.6%	31.9%	24.1%	28.3%
To be seen representing my community	24.8%	16.2%	21.1%	20.0%	20.6%
I don't trust the mail to deliver my ballot	21.0%	28.5%	27.9%	30.1%	28.7%
Other	6.4%	6.1%	5.8%	11.8%	9.0%

Data Source: CID Voter Experience Survey

Los Angeles County

The most cited reasons Black Los Angeles County voters cast their ballot in person was to be seen representing their community (34.2%) and to receive an "I Voted" sticker (32.9%), the highest of percentages of all racial and ethnic groups examined (Table 24). Black voters also reported voting in person in order to receive language assistance (10.5%), to use an accessible voting machine (15.8%), to update their registration (25.0%), or fill out a replacement ballot (11.8%) at higher rates than other voters of color.

Table 24: Why did you vote in person at a voting location in the November 2020 general election? Los Angeles County

	Black	Asian American	Latino	White Non-Latino	All Voters
To receive language assistance	10.5%	5.7%	7.6%	21.4%	14.2%
To use an accessible voting machine for voters with disabilities	15.8%	13.2%	10.9%	20.3%	16.0%
To register to vote or update an existing registration record	25.0%	20.8%	16.8%	28.3%	23.5%
To fill out a replacement ballot for the one I received in the mail	11.8%	7.5%	11.4%	19.3%	15.2%
To receive an "I Voted" sticker	32.9%	37.7%	28.3%	24.5%	27.9%
To be seen representing my community	34.2%	13.2%	18.5%	21.0%	21.6%
I don't trust the mail to deliver my ballot	25.0%	26.4%	27.2%	23.1%	25.3%
Other	10.5%	11.3%	7.1%	9.3%	9.0%

Data Source: CID Voter Experience Survey

6. Why did you choose that specific in-person voting location to vote or drop off your vote-by-mail ballot in the 2020 general election?

We asked voters why they chose the specific in-person voting location in the general election. Respondents could choose multiple options. Table 25 shows that just over 53% of Black voters indicated that they selected a voting location close to home, a lower percentage than both Asian Americans (60.8%) and Latinos (56.7%). In contrast, Black voters chose voting locations close to their school or children's school at a higher rate than all voters (7.4% and 4.6%, respectively). Black (and Latino) voters indicated they were assigned to a voting location at a higher rate (both at 27.6%) than Asian Americans (22.5%) but notably lower than white, non-Latino voters (37.5%).

Table 25: Why did you choose that specific in-person voting location to vote or drop off your vote-by-mail ballot? Statewide

	Black	Asian American	Latino	White Non-Latino	All Voters
Assigned location to vote by county elections office	27.6%	22.5%	27.6%	37.5%	32.5%
Convenient operating days/hours	21.8%	28.4%	21.3%	28.2%	25.8%
Close to home	53.5%	60.8%	56.7%	52.0%	54.4%
Close to work	16.5%	12.0%	12.0%	10.7%	11.5%
Close to school or my children's school	7.4%	4.1%	4.0%	4.6%	4.6%
Close to social activities	6.2%	2.3%	4.2%	6.5%	5.3%
Close to shopping	3.7%	4.7%	3.6%	5.8%	4.9%
Close to public transportation routes	4.1%	2.0%	3.1%	2.9%	3.0%
Availability of parking	4.1%	3.8%	4.1%	5.8%	4.9%
Other	2.1%	2.0%	1.9%	3.8%	2.9%

Data Source: CID Voter Experience Survey

Los Angeles County

Similar to voters across the state, the most common reasons that Black Los Angeles voters chose a specific voting location was that it was close to home (59.4%) or assigned by county elections office (28.7%).* Table 26 shows that Black voters were less likely to choose a location that had convenient operating days or hours (20.8%) compared to voters overall (27.2%). Additionally, Black voters in Los Angeles County indicated that they selected a voting location close to their school or their children's school at a higher percent (10.9%) than Los Angeles voters, as a whole (6.1%).

*In 2020, Los Angeles County conducted elections under the VCA. Registered voters were not assigned vote locations and could choose any vote center in the county to cast a ballot. Survey respondents who selected "assigned location to vote by county elections office" as their reason to vote at that specific in-person voting location may be reflective of their lack of awareness that Los Angeles County had adopted a new voting system.

Table 26: Why did you choose that specific in-person voting location to vote or drop off your vote-by-mail ballot? Los Angeles County

	Black	Asian American	Latino	White Non-Latino	All Voters
Assigned location to vote by county elections office	28.7%	14.3%	24.0%	32.3%	27.8%
Convenient operating days/hours	20.8%	26.4%	20.4%	33.2%	27.2%
Close to home	59.4%	62.6%	60.2%	55.2%	58.0%
Close to work	18.8%	18.7%	11.1%	16.9%	15.4%
Close to school or my children's school	10.9%	3.3%	3.9%	7.2%	6.1%
Close to social activities	5.0%	2.2%	4.3%	9.5%	6.7%
Close to shopping	3.0%	4.4%	3.9%	7.2%	5.5%
Close to public transportation routes	5.9%	5.5%	2.5%	4.9%	4.5%
Availability of parking	4.0%	1.1%	2.9%	7.4%	5.0%
Other	2.0%	1.1%	1.8%	2.1%	1.9%

Data Source: CID Voter Experience Survey

7. Thinking ahead to future elections, what would be your most preferred way to cast a ballot?

We asked eligible voters (including those who did not vote in 2020), what would be their most preferred way to cast a ballot in future elections. Table 27 shows that Black eligible voters (including Black citizens who didn't vote in the 2020 general election) reported similar preferences for voting in future elections compared with voters statewide with some slight distinctions. Black eligible voters most preferred voting in person sometime in the ten days before Election Day (28.5%), followed by voting at an in-person location on Election Day (20.0%). Black eligible voters have a slight preference over all eligible voters (combined) for voting early in the three days before an election (11.1% vs. 8.7%), mailing in a VBM ballot (12.2% vs. 10.1%), or dropping off a VBM ballot at a drop box (2.6% vs. 2.4%).

Table 27: Thinking ahead to future elections, what would be your most preferred way to cast a ballot? Statewide

	Black	Asian American	Latino	White Non-Latino	All Voters
Voting at an in-person voting location on Election Day	20.0%	18.3%	23.5%	24.0%	22.8%
Voting early at an in-person voting location sometime in the three days before Election Day	11.1%	9.5%	9.9%	7.3%	8.7%
Voting early at an in-person voting location sometime in the ten days before Election Day	28.5%	32.6%	26.7%	38.2%	33.3%
Mailing in a ballot that was sent to my home a month before Election Day	12.2%	11.8%	11.8%	8.2%	10.1%
Dropping off my vote-by-mail ballot at an in-person voting location, after having that ballot mailed to my home a month before Election Day	8.3%	11.3%	7.8%	10.8%	9.8%
Dropping off my vote-by-mail ballot in a ballot drop-off box, after having that ballot mailed to my home a month before Election Day	2.6%	2.4%	2.4%	2.3%	2.4%
Using different voting methods in different elections	6.0%	4.3%	6.2%	3.3%	4.5%
None	3.6%	4.0%	4.9%	2.1%	3.4%
Don't Know	7.6%	5.8%	6.7%	3.8%	5.2%

Data Source: CID Voter Experience Survey

Los Angeles County

Black eligible voters in Los Angeles County had similar voting preferences to eligible Black voters statewide, with a slight preference for voting in person on Election Day, 21.6% vs. 20.0%, respectively (Table 28). Black eligible voters in Los Angeles County were somewhat less likely to report wanting to drop off a VBM ballot at either a drop box or in-person voting location when compared to the other voting groups.

Table 28: Thinking ahead to future elections, what would be your most preferred way to cast a ballot? Los Angeles County

	Black	Asian American	Latino	White Non-Latino	All Voters
Voting at an in-person voting location on Election Day	21.6%	21.2%	23.2%	28.1%	24.6%
Voting early at an in-person voting location sometime in the three days before Election Day	13.2%	9.2%	12.1%	10.9%	11.5%
Voting early at an in-person voting location sometime in the ten days before Election Day	27.5%	31.8%	22.8%	28.6%	26.7%
Mailing in a ballot that was sent to my home a month before Election Day	9.5%	10.3%	12.3%	7.8%	10.0%
Dropping off my vote-by-mail ballot at an in-person voting location, after having that ballot mailed to my home a month before Election Day	8.8%	10.9%	8.7%	11.2%	10.0%
Dropping off my vote-by-mail ballot in a ballot drop-off box, after having that ballot mailed to my home a month before Election Day	2.6%	3.9%	2.8%	2.4%	2.8%
Using different voting methods in different elections	4.0%	3.6%	6.1%	2.7%	4.2%
None	3.7%	3.3%	3.0%	1.8%	2.7%
Don't Know	9.2%	5.8%	9.0%	6.5%	7.5%

Data Source: CID Voter Experience Survey

8. In the future, what features would you likely use if you vote at an in-person voting location?

We asked eligible voters (regardless of whether they voted in the 2020 general election) what features they would likely use if they voted at an in-person voting location in the future. Respondents could choose multiple options. Table 29 shows that voting in person is the feature that all eligible voters would most like to use (46.3%) at a voting location in future elections. However, a slightly lower percentage of Black voters selected this option (43.6%). Exactly 14% of Black voters said they would not vote in person in future elections, a lower percentage than Asian-American (16.0%) and white, non-Latino (19.3%) voters. Additionally, if voting in person, 10.6% of Black eligible voters said they would likely use accessible voting machines, the highest percent of any racial or ethnic group examined.

Table 29: In the future, what features would you likely use if you vote at an in-person voting location? Statewide

	Black	Asian American	Latino	White Non-Latino	All Voters
Voting in person	43.6%	42.5%	46.5%	47.8%	46.3%
Dropping off my vote-by-mail ballot	40.1%	47.7%	36.9%	42.5%	41.4%
Language assistance	7.5%	8.3%	7.7%	4.6%	6.2%
Accessible voting machine for voters with disabilities	10.6%	9.8%	9.3%	7.8%	8.8%
Registering to vote	12.1%	14.0%	11.8%	9.4%	10.9%
None, I would not vote in person at a voting location	14.0%	16.0%	13.9%	19.3%	16.8%
Other	1.1%	0.8%	2.0%	1.9%	1.8%

Data Source: CID Voter Experience Survey

Los Angeles County

Table 30 shows that a higher percentage of Black eligible voters in Los Angeles County would vote in person at a voting location (54.2%) – the highest percentage of all voters of color – compared to Black eligible voters in the state overall (43.6%). Another 41.8% of Black Los Angeles eligible voters said they would drop off their VBM ballot at a voting location. Black eligible voters said they would register to vote (13.6%) and use an accessible voting machine (11.7%) at higher rates than all other voting groups. Further, 11.7% of Black eligible voters said they would not vote in person at a voting location in the future.

Table 30: In the future, what features would you likely use if you vote at an in-person voting location? (choose all that apply) Los Angeles County

	Black	Asian American	Latino	White Non-Latino	All Voters
Voting in person	54.2%	46.6%	49.5%	56.1%	52.2%
Dropping off my vote-by-mail ballot	41.8%	46.3%	36.5%	42.4%	40.9%
Language assistance	6.2%	8.9%	9.7%	8.2%	8.5%
Accessible voting machine for voters with disabilities	11.7%	9.8%	8.7%	9.3%	9.5%
Registering to vote	13.6%	12.1%	13.3%	11.1%	12.3%
None, I would not vote in person at a voting location	11.7%	11.5%	11.5%	12.5%	12.0%
Other	0.0%	1.1%	1.3%	1.5%	1.3%

Data Source: CID Voter Experience Survey

Table 31: Specific Outreach and Targeted Communications Efforts in the 2020 General Election - VCA Counties	
Black Voters	County
-	Amador County
-	Butte County
-	Calaveras County
-	El Dorado County
Yes	Fresno County
Yes	Los Angeles County
-	Madera County
-	Mariposa County
-	Napa County
-	Nevada County
Yes	Orange County
Yes	Sacramento County
-	San Mateo County
-	Santa Clara County
-	Tuolumne County
4/15	Total

Data Source: CID County Elections Office Survey
Table was created from the responses to the open-ended question, "Did your office specifically targeted communications efforts to Black, indigenous, or formerly incarcerated voters?"

A dash (-) indicates a county answered no or answer wasn't in that survey category.

Two-thirds of California counties administering the Voter's Choice Act (VCA) (Amador, Butte, Calaveras, El Dorado, Madera, Mariposa, Napa, Nevada, San Mateo, and Tuolumne) reported that they did not specifically conduct outreach efforts to Black voters in the 2020 general election. Fresno, Los Angeles, Orange, and Sacramento counties reported reaching out to to Black voters. Butte did not host in-person events due to the pandemic, but they reported maintaining open lines of communication with their stakeholders, which in the 2020 general election included Black community groups. Napa did not specifically target Black voters but noted their community partners did.

Methods of outreach to Black voters included:

- Radio station advertisements (Sacramento),
- Unique regional posters in neighborhoods that are predominately Black (Fresno),
- Print and digital advertisements in media geared toward Black voters (Sacramento),
- Hosting events (in-person or virtual) for Black voters (Orange and Sacramento), and
- Flyer delivery to Black community businesses (Sacramento).

Research Question Four

What are opportunities for the Engagement of Black Voters in California?

A better understanding of why and how Black voters engage with the electoral process in California can help inform efforts aimed at conducting more effective voter outreach to Black communities.

To this purpose, CID conducted seven focus groups with Black California voters, constructed with a range of participant age groups, incomes, educational levels, genders, ballot types, and voting frequencies. These focus groups included six to ten participants each and were conducted virtually with participants in the Bay Area, Sacramento, San Diego, the Central Valley, and the Los Angeles area between September 2021 to February 2022. These focus groups produced in-depth discussions on the factors involved in the decisions of Black voters to vote, and when and by what voting method they cast their ballots. This section of the report highlights findings organized around the following sub-topics:

1. Reasons for Participating in the Voting Process
2. Reasons for Voting Method Selection
3. Factors Involved in Voting Method Change

1. Reasons for Participating in the Voting Process

Focus group participants had diverse reasons for why they vote in elections. Across Black demographic groups and voting methods, the most commonly shared reasons for participating in the voting process were:

- Recognition of U.S. History of Black Voter Suppression
- Make an Impact
- Policy Preferences

Recognition of U.S. History of Black Voter Suppression

For many Black voters, the act of voting was not individual. Black focus group participants connected their vote to a shared sense of obligation to the greater Black community while recognizing the long fight against Black voter suppression in the United States. Voting was described as an act of responsibility to the Black community. Consistent with CID's survey findings as discussed earlier in this report, some voters said they vote in person so they can be seen representing the Black community while voting.

An overwhelming majority of our participants either cited previous generations or Black voting history in the U.S. as one of the main reasons they voted, regardless of voting method. As one Central Valley voter stated, “I vote because I feel like it’s an obligation based on history, this country and everything that Black people have gone through. And I feel like it’s my responsibility to vote.” Another voter said, “I feel like I have a duty and obligation to my ancestors who fought for my right to vote.”

Make an Impact

Most focus group participants also expressed a goal of wanting their vote to generally make an impact in the world without specifically citing a policy or historical connection. For these voters, the act of voting itself made them feel empowered that they could make an impact. As a Los Angeles County voter explained, “[M]y parents taught me that voting does make the difference. But I think I thought at the time, I’m just one person, what difference can it make. But as I’ve gotten older, I see evidence now even though I’m just one person […] I want to try to help make my voice make a difference.”

For some voters who wanted their vote to have an impact, there was uncertainty as to whether casting their ballot would actually make a difference in the political process. However, despite their doubts, they still wanted to vote so that a possibility would remain that their voice could be heard.

For example, a voter from the Bay Area was generally skeptical if their vote would count, while a Los Angeles County voter did not trust politicians to fulfill their promises:

> I am skeptical if my vote actually counts. I definitely want my voice to be heard. And, especially for my ethnicity, in my culture, for changes with the President and future. It [will] definitely be impactful if [my] voice is heard. But like I said, I'm definitely skeptical of the whole voting system. There definitely needs to be an overhaul.

> I have my doubts about politicians because I've seen them go into office making all these promises and then never keep them. So I don't think they necessarily are honest upfront, in terms of what they're going to do. And sometimes I think that they're going to cower down to keep that office [they] spent hours to get. So I vote because I hope it makes a difference.

Policy Preferences

Many focus group participants cited wanting to have an influence on the issues and candidates as the reason for why they vote. These voters made a clear connection between casting their ballot and outcomes that were relevant to them, their families or their communities.

As one Los Angeles County voter explained, "Personally, when it comes down to programs and laws that are going to impact people that look like me, at the local, state and national level, I want to make sure that I'm seen, and my input is always included as those laws and programs are going forward." Another Los Angeles County voter summed up, "I vote to have my rights heard, and to be able to speak my opinion on who I think should be in office and what they do. That is why [I vote]."

2. Reasons for Voting Method Selection

As noted earlier in this report, all California registered voters in the 2020 general election automatically received a vote-by-mail ballot. Voters had the option of submitting their ballot through the mail or, dropping it off at a voting location or a standalone drop box. Voters could opt not to use their mail ballot and, instead, vote in person on a voting machine at a county voting location. The most common reasons shared by focus group participants for using a particular voting method when they cast their ballot in the 2020 general election were:

- Convenience
- Benefits of Social Interactions
- Ballot Security

Convenience

Most focus group participants said they chose the method of voting they used in the 2020 general election due to convenience, but how these voters defined convenience varied greatly, with some voters preferring to mail or drop off a VBM ballot and other's utilizing a polling location in an easily accessible, conveniently sited location.

> VBM voters discussed several conveniences of voting at home, including being able to consult reference materials, their schedules, and not needing to travel anywhere. As one voter reported: "At home, I can research the issues and the candidates at the same time. If I had to go in person […] I'd carve out the time to sit down and research, and then I have to carve out the time to actually go down to the polling place. So with the mail ballot, I can just do both of those tasks simultaneously. And that contributes to the convenience of vote by mail.

Another long time VBM user said, "Yeah, it was the same, same business as usual. You know, just returning by mail, and in no real need to go outside. Easy. And in fact, that's been a pattern for a while now, even before the pandemic." Another voter discussed the reality of their work schedule and how it impacted their method of voting, "The job that I do has, you know, kind of weird hours and I do a lot of overtime. And I commute quite a bit. And so as soon as I was eligible to do mail in, I did mail in. And, you know, so it's just more convenient for me."

Some voters reported the convenience of using a drop box or dropping off their ballot at a voting location, instead of the mail, in terms of timing and the desire to ensure their ballot was received and counted.

> I dropped off [my mail ballot] at my local polling place. I got really busy around that time so I forgot to actually go to the post office. But it was really simple, like most people are saying, in fact, I dropped mine off in the morning. So I think I was like the only person at my location. And I thought it'd be really straightforward. I usually do vote by mail.

One voter specifically chose a "convenient" drop box at a city office because they felt tampering would be less likely at that location, "I used a [drop] box because it's convenient. They're located all over. It's easy to use, I can have my neighbor drop it off or I can drop it off or somebody who's going that way to drop it off. So, it's convenience. And it's secured too because again, it's at a city office outside."

However, for some voters, the method they used to vote was not about convenience but instead a perceived lack of choice in options resulting in some level of inconvenience for them. A Los Angeles area voter noted, "I have been affected by cutbacks in the past. They've taken a lot of the mailboxes out of my neighborhood so I can't walk to the mailbox anymore. I have to literally jump on a bus or drive somewhere to reach a mailbox."

Benefits of Social Interactions

Focus group participants who voted in person frequently cited the social rewards they experience from interacting with others at their voting location. For many, these rewards were connected to being a member of their community, the positive feeling of in-person voting, or for a first-time voter, getting the full experience:

> [Voting in person] is a good way for me to meet my neighbors, because when I go the polling place [...] they had people from the neighborhood there so I got to meet my neighbors. They also really thanked me and made me feel really good about voting. They were very appreciative. So it was a pleasant experience. Plus, I got the little sticker that said "I voted" that I was able to put on as well.

> So I like voting and [I] like voting in person, because I like feeling the energy of people around me as we're standing in line. And when we get inside the building to actually vote, there's a sense of excitement and adrenaline running. That makes me feel like I'm part of a movement like I'm doing something special.

> [I like] to go in person to do my vote live, rather than, mailing it off or whatever. And not saying that those other methods, anything is wrong with them, but just wanted to have that experience of doing it in person. Because […] it's your first year, you're always seeing it [voting] on TV and all of that. So just wanted to have that experience.

Notably, some voters talked about experiencing fewer social benefits over time from voting in person. In these cases, voters prioritized convenience and switched to mail voting. For example:

> For the most part I […] stopped voting at a polling location. I did that in the beginning because it made me feel like I was a part of something, that I was making a difference. After […] a while, that sense of feeling like I was making a difference started to wane. And I didn't feel like my voice was as important as I thought it was in the beginning. So I shifted from voting in person to voting by mail.

Ballot Security

In the months leading up to the 2020 general election, there was notable news coverage and social media commentary regarding delays Americans were experiencing with USPS deliveries. At the same time, the Postmaster General was receiving criticism for structural changes being made to mail processing, particularly over changes to the processing of mail ballots. Some critics and analysts charged USPS with deliberately attempting to impact the timely delivery of mail ballots and, thus, potentially the outcome of the presidential race. These concerns were echoed directly from some focus group participants who described how their lack of trust in USPS delivery or USPS employee tampering influenced their switch to a different method of voting in 2020.

One Bay Area voter summed up his concern about USPS reliability, "I received my ballot in the mail like everybody in California, but I completed it and I returned it to the Registrar of Voters office. With everything going on last year, I wasn't confident in the mail system. So I did drive it down there and put it in the Dropbox." Another voter explained a similar fear, "I was concerned a little […] with the people who are running for president. So I decided to walk it and put it in [drop off at voting location]. So that there would be no excuses that it would be counted."

For other focus group participants, the concern with mail delivery was not about the USPS capability in delivering ballots but rather they feared the highly polarized political context of the 2020 general election might incentivize mail ballot tampering by USPS employees. One Bay Area voter described her concerns this way:

> It seemed like that with this last presidential election, that I believe in some areas, there were some mail that was lost or misplaced? I never had a concern before. But the concern, […] from the time that the mailman picks it up and gets sorted […] is there going to be somebody in that in that environment that's going to [...] want to take it upon themselves to try to destroy some ballots or just lose them? And it's happened so that's definitely on my mind moving forward, especially with everything that's going on now. And just makes you wonder, is the process secure? And as of right now, the way that this country is going, you know, everybody's going either far left or far right. It's up in the air, in my opinion.

It was not an issue of trust for all voters who had concerns about USPS delivery. One Sacramento voter explained their assessment of their mail carrier's capacity, "So I was concerned about putting added stress on my mail carriers, I trust my mail carriers to deliver my mail. But I know that they were really overwhelmed at that time. So I just decided that it would probably be best for me to just go drop off my ballot in person.

Some voters also talked about their willingness to travel to a voting location to drop off their mail ballot because they felt the staffed location was more secure. One voter described how she and her mother dropped of their ballots after completing them together on her weekly visit to her mother's house, "We did it together, we filled it out together, […] and dropped it off with Uber to drop it off at the place, […] just because it felt a little more secure. Personally, I don't know if maybe does it feel more secure? I was like, if I vote, I want to make sure it gets to where it's gonna go. Or where it's supposed to go."

Two participants discussed how mailboxes in their neighborhoods are not safe to use at any time, which left limited options for voters that did not want to vote in person due to the pandemic. As one Los Angeles County voter noted:

> Well, my local mailbox is frequently broken into, the local one that you can drop your mail into on the corner. It's like everyone in the neighborhood knows if you have to drop some mail off, don't put it in there. So if it's frequently broken into I just imagined that somebody would break into the mail in ballot box and find a way to sabotage it. Or maybe some rowdy kids might throw something in there [...] So I still walked in drop it off in person] [...] But I didn't want my grandparents to walk in […] So I know a lot of people just didn't vote because of access and fear. I mean, there's a lot fear that drove I think most of the election last year.

It should be noted that some focus group participants had long-standing concerns over ballot security that they indicated were related to issues with the USPS generally, and unrelated to the process and staffing changes that occurred in 2020. Black voters also talked about doubts they had around the safety and integrity of the voting process in general and their

fears about whether their votes would be suppressed at some point in the voting process, either by a civilian tampering with a drop box, USPS staff, or elections office staff. Due to this, these voters specifically expressed a desire to know exactly where their ballots were, to have control over their ballots until they saw their ballots go into a ballot box (for both polling-place voters and VBM drop-off voters).

3. Factors Involved in Voting Method Change

Along with California's expanded options for how and when voters could cast their ballots in the 2020 general election, the COVID-19 pandemic was in full swing in the state. Both of these factors impacted voting behavior in California. CID research found that the state saw an unprecedented increase in the use of mail drop boxes in the 2020 general election and a notable decrease of in-person voting compared to previous elections.[17] See CID report, California's Changing Electorate: a 2020 Post Election Analysis of Voting Behavior.

Focus group participants cited multiple reasons for why they changed their method of voting in the 2020 general election. Across demographic groups, the most commonly shared reasons for changing the voting method were:

- Voting Location Changed
- Avoid Voting Lines
- Problem with Ballot or Lack of Voting Information
- Avoid Contracting COVID-19

Voting Location Changed

Many voters across the state said they began voting by mail – not because they automatically received a VBM ballot in the mail – but because their in-person voting location had changed. One San Diego voter, who used a mail ballot for the first time in the 2020 general election, talked about why they made the change from voting in person:

> Yeah, they actually changed my location. This was years ago, they changed my polling place on me at the last minute. And I couldn't make it to the new location because it was too far from me. I don't drive and I think I was getting off work late. And I just didn't feel safe traveling on the bus to an unknown location. And I think I ended up not voting in that particular election because of that.

As another Los Angeles area voter summarized, "Well, for me, my voting place changed. I don't even know where it is. I have the address, but I've actually never gone to it. I do it [vote] by mail now." One voter indicated that the new voting location was further away and had long lines, "I changed [to voting by mail] because it's just much more convenient. I think I had an issue one year where my polling place changed at the last minute and I didn't understand why […] the new polling place was like a lot further than the original place was. And then also the lines are just super long."

Avoid Voting Lines

Many focus group respondents reported that they changed voting methods due to long lines at voting locations. One voter explained:

> The lines got a little bit longer. Towards the end, when I was voting in person I was working. So a lot of times I would go towards the very end [of Election Day]. And there was that rush of people trying to get their vote in at the very last minute. So it wasn't as convenient. And it wasn't as pleasant as previously when I was going either during the day on a day off or at the beginning. So that's why I switched.

Some focus group participants also discussed how they saw voter suppression tactics being used nationwide, often in Black communities, to make it harder to vote, including fewer voting locations causing longer lines. Some participants responded that they felt that this generally was not the case in California.

Problem with Ballot or Lack of Voting Information

Some focus group participants noted not receiving a VBM ballot or other problems with their ballots that required them to vote in person. As one voter said, "I voted for the general election. I ended up voting a little late. I think I did it almost at the last minute just because my ballot hadn't arrived. So I think maybe like a day or two before the election I ended up rushing to go down to vote in person."

Avoid Contracting COVID-19

As noted earlier, the 2020 general election took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and some voters indicated voting by mail to prevent possible infection. One voter described his fears around voting in the COVID-19 environment, "It [voting by mail] was easier that way. Because I didn't want to take a risk of getting sick with the pandemic. I don't know what's out there. And I voted by mail. […] [Last election,] I voted in person." Another voter explained, "Yeah, I did the mail ballot. And it was simple, easy. Definitely different from going in. I'll just say it was convenient, because I for one was a little bit scared with everything. You know, the virus going on. But simple, easy, fast. And I really liked it."

Focus Group Summary

Voters' lives are complicated. Many voters cited multiple reasons that simultaneously influenced why they participated in the electoral process and how they chose their method of voting. Across all focus groups, the history and struggle for Black voting rights was very salient to voters and connected them to the act of voting personally with some variation in the intensity of this feeling by age and gender. Many voters also felt a duty to their community and felt that by voting they could make an impact on policy, while others were more skeptical.

Voters prioritized convenience, security, and benefits of social interaction when deciding how and where to cast their ballots. Security had a different meaning for each voter, so while some found a drop box most secure others thought voting in-person was the safest way to cast a ballot.

Interestingly, despite California law requiring counties to mail all registered voters a VBM ballot, receiving a VBM ballot was only specifically cited by two residents as a reason for changing their voting methods. Instead, voters most commonly changed methods because their voting location had changed (decision to vote by mail), due to a last-minute issue (decision to vote in-person), or for security or health reasons.

Participants also expressed an appreciation for the options they had in the 2020 general election, regardless of whether or not they were fully aware of each method available to them. One voter encapsulated the opinions expressed on this topic:

> I just like the options. That's what we need. We need options but you never know how your day is going to turn out like oh, I can't make it […] maybe I can drive and drop it off. Oh, maybe there's a dropbox near my work or the gym or something instead. So the more options the better from my perspective and I'd be sad or disappointed if any of those options that we had during the pandemic went away even if they were not [supposed to be] permanent.

Looking to future elections, there was notable interest among many focus group participants regarding the perceived benefits of BallotTrax, California's ballot tracking system where voters can sign up to receive emails, texts, and phone messages updating them on the status of their vote-by-mail ballot.[18]

While most voters had not heard of the ballot tracking option, for those few who had used the new program, they indicated that it provided an additional level of assurance that their vote had been counted and, for a few, a greater confidence in the voting process more broadly.

As one VBM voter summed up, "I didn't have security concerns previously. But the added bonus is you know […] the tracking. Preferred way will be mail-in ballot and the reason why I feel secure with that is because of the tracking. So convenient and now I can track it so why would I do anything else?"

Conclusion

California's 2020 general election saw record voting turnout, however, this analysis highlights the need for additional efforts to achieve voting equity for Black voters. Looking at historical California turnout rates, Black eligible voters have experienced notable gaps between their turnout and the turnout of white, non-Latino voters in every California general election since at least 2004. During that time period, the turnout gap between Black and white, non-Latino voters in general elections has increased.

In the 2020 California general election, Black eligible voters had lower state-level turnout rates than white, non-Latino voters and the overall population. Black voters did, however, have higher eligible voter turnout rates than both Asian-American and Latino eligible voters, both of which had larger turnout gaps with white, non-Latino eligible voters.

Turnout Characteristics of Black Communities in California

CID found that 45 out of California's 9,129 census tracts had a population that was 50.0% or more Black. Within these census tracts, the eligible voter turnout rate among Black voters was 75.2%, with 72,453 Black voters casting a ballot. This turnout rate is higher than the total eligible voter turnout (67.6%) for California overall (all census tracts combined).

Among Black majority census tracts, four had low eligible voter turnout (below 52.4%) and 11 had high eligible voter turnout (above 79.3%). Additionally, CID identified 92 census tracts with a Black plurality, 17 of which had low eligible voter turnout and 22 of which had high eligible voter turnout. Generally, Black majority and plurality census tracts with low eligible voter turnout had low average median incomes ($33,263 and $32,730, respectively) compared to those with high registered voter turnout ($76,082 and $71,825, respectively). Census tracts with Black majorities and Black pluralities were concentrated in Los Angeles County and the San Francisco Bay Area. (Note: Trends found in Black majority and Black plurality census tracts only represent trends within these communities and are not representative of all Black voters throughout California.)

The share of Black majority census tracts with high eligible voter turnout was lower than the share of white, non-Latino majority census tracts with high eligible voter turnout. While around one-quarter of Black majority census tracts had high eligible voter turnout, nearly half (46.4%) of white, non-Latino majority census tracts had high eligible voter turnout. Additionally, the average median income in majority Black census tracts with high eligible voter turnout ($76,082) was notably lower than the median income in majority white, non-Latino census tracts with high eligible voter turnout ($107,678). Similarly, the most commonly attained education level in Black majority census tracts with high eligible voter turnout (some college or associate degree) was lower than the average education level in white, non-Latino majority census tracts with high eligible voter turnout (bachelor's degree or higher).

Methods of Voting Used by Black Communities

Voters in Black majority census tracts used vote centers and polling places at higher rates than voters in all census tracts. Over 18% of voters living in Black majority census tracts voted in person at a vote center or polling place, compared to 12.5% of voters in all census tracts. Black voters in Black majority census tracts, however, voted in person (17.9%) at slightly lower rates than the general population in Black majority census tracts. Over 20% of voters in majority Black census tracts dropped off their VBM ballot at a vote center or polling place, while 16.2% of votes in all census tracts did the same. Black voters in Black majority census tracts (20.6%) had slightly higher rates of VBM drop off at a vote center or polling place than the general population.

Similar trends were found in census tracts with Black plurality. Within these census tracts, voters voted in person (16.2%) and by dropping off VBM ballots at vote centers or polling places (19.2%) at higher rates than voters in all census tracts. The rates of vote center and polling place use, however, was lower in census tracts with Black plurality than census tracts with Black majority. (Note: Trends found in Black majority and Black plurality census tracts only represent trends within these communities and are not representative of all Black voters throughout California.)

Sources of Election Information for Black Voters and Their Preferences for How They Cast Their Ballots Now and in Future Elections

Across the state, voters overall were largely unaware of voting changes in the 2020 general election. Of all the racial and ethnic groups surveyed, Black eligible voters had the highest percentage of eligible voters reporting that they knew their county had made changes for how and where voters could cast a ballot, however still almost two-thirds of Black voters were unaware or did not know that their county made voting changes.

Voters of all racial and ethnic groups learned about voting options and locations through similar methods, although with some notable distinctions between groups. The most common ways that Black eligible voters learned of their county's voting changes was through social media, followed by media (newspaper or television), and political campaigns/candidates, trends that were similar to voters statewide. However, Black eligible voters heard about new voting options from political candidates/campaigns, community groups, text message, email, or phone call at higher rates than other racial or ethnic groups. The top sources of information related to voting locations for all racial and ethnic groups was official county-created materials (voter information guides, county websites, and VBM packets), although higher percentages of Black voters reported learning about voting changes from their county voter information guide and their VBM packet than Asian-American or Latino voters.

When considering in-person voting locations, it is important to consider how methods of transportation and reasons for voting in person vary between groups. The majority of voters drove to voting locations in the 2020 general election. Black voters, however, were the least likely to drive to a vote center and were more likely to use public transportation and paratransit when compared to Asian-American, Latino, and non-Latino white voters. The top reasons Black voters voted at an in-person voting location in the general election was to receive an "I Voted" sticker which stands in contrast to white voters statewide who most commonly chose to vote in person due to distrust in mail delivery. Black voters had the highest percentage among all racial and ethnic groups stating they wanted to be seen representing their community, as well as stating the need to use an accessible voting machine. Similar to voters across the state, the most common reasons that Black voters chose a specific voting location was that it was close to home or assigned by their county elections office. Black voters were more likely than other groups to select a location close to their school or their children's school.

Black eligible voters reported similar preferences for voting in future elections compared with voters statewide, with most preferring to vote in person sometime in the 10 days before Election Day followed by voting at an in-person location on Election Day. Black eligible voters had a notable preference over the other voting groups for voting early in the three days before an election and mailing in a VBM ballot. Black eligible voters were also more likely than other voting groups to say they would vote in person to use an accessible voting machine and to update voter registration.

Opportunities for Engagement of Black Voters in California

A better understanding of why and how Black voters engage with the electoral process in California can help inform efforts by elections officials and advocacy groups aimed at conducting more effective voter outreach to Black communities.

Across all focus groups, the history and struggle for Black voting rights was very salient to Black voters and connected them to the act of voting personally with some variation in the intensity of this feeling by age and gender. Many Black focus group participants noted a sense of obligation to previous generations and to the greater Black community as a reason for why they vote.

Policy issues also motivated Black voters to vote for specific initiatives or candidates. Focus group participants also mentioned learning about issues and campaigns from news sources, social media, and their personal networks.

When deciding which method to use to cast their ballot, Black focus group participants weighed convenience and security. Some voters mentioned challenging work schedules, a fear of potential ballot tampering issues, or risk of exposure to COVID-19. Additionally, some voters highlighted that they voted in-person for the social experience and to be seen representing their community when voting.

Some Black voters in 2020 used a different voting method than the voting method they used in previous elections. These voters cited either having a last-minute issue which required the change or a health (related to COVID-19) or security concern (ballot would not be counted). Additionally, many voters noted that they used a VBM ballot because their voting location had moved to an inconvenient location that was typically further away.

Recommendations:

Voter turnout disparities exist when comparing Black communities (both Black majority and Black plurality) to white (non-Latino) communities in California.

Elections officials and advocacy groups need to target election reforms to reduce disparities in voter turnout between Black and white voters.

- Over the last two decades the eligible voter turnout gap has widened between Black and white, non-Latino voters.
- In Black majority or plurality communities with low eligible voter turnout, elections officials should increase voting infrastructure to ensure convenient access to multiple voting options (mailboxes, drop boxes, in-person locations).
- Some Black focus group participants noted concern that USPS mailboxes or voter drop boxes would be damaged or tampered within their community. County elections officials should determine ways to build confidence and trust in USPS mailboxes year-round and place drop boxes in secure locations.
- Black voters were the least likely to drive to a voting location and somewhat more likely than other racial or ethnic groups to need or prefer to access an accessible voting machine. These findings should be considered when siting voting locations and drop boxes in Black communities.

Almost two-thirds of Black eligible voters were unaware or did not know that their county made voting changes during the 2020 general election. Additional funding should be allocated to inform Black voters of voting options.

Elections officials should invest more in outreach and education efforts, including by identifying trusted messengers to relay voting information to voters.

- Elections officials should increase voter outreach and education efforts aimed at making more Black voters aware of the changes in when and how they can cast their ballots in California.
- Social media, political campaigns, and community groups were especially important messengers of voting information for Black voters. Community advocates and elections officials should identify trusted and popular sources to help share information about voting.
- Black voters, more than other racial and ethnic groups, were motivated to vote because of a desire to be seen representing their community while voting. This information should be considered when crafting voter outreach methods and siting voting locations and drop boxes.
- Advocates and elections officials should work together to increase confidence in the voting process and options for voting. Promotion of BallotTrax could be used to help increase confidence in voting by VBM ballot.

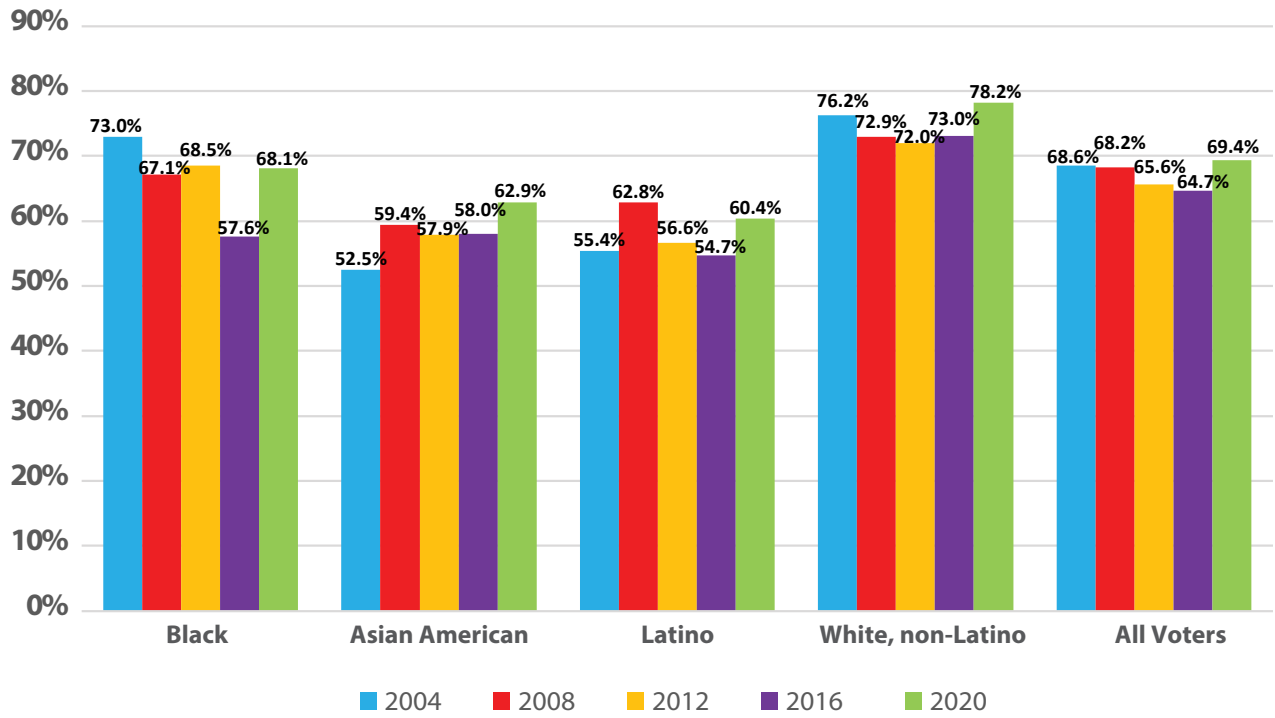
Limited demographic information in county and state voter files hinders progress to improve the election experience for all voters. We encourage elections officials, policymakers, and stakeholders to discuss legal and reliable ways to gather more complete demographic data in California (and nationwide) during and after the voter registration process.

Notes

1. For more information on the CPS voting and registration supplement, see: https://www.census.gov/topics/public-sector/voting/about.html
2. For more information on the CPS methodology, see: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/technical-documentation/methodology.html
3. For information on the VoteCal system, see https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/voter-registration/votecal-project
4. Because the California Election Code does not require registered voters to identify their race or ethnicity, the California voter file provides an incomplete flag for this information. While self-reported ethnicity data is generally reliable as an identifier, low self-reporting rates result in an incomplete VoteCal dataset. Further, the voting behavior and demographic characteristics of California registrants who answered this question are different than the ones who don't (self-selection bias), resulting in an unrepresentative sample of the total electorate.
5. Political Data, Inc. provided county voter registration file extracts for the 2020 general election. These data are the actual registration 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. Latinos and Asian Americans are distinguished in the registration data from the general population primarily by using Spanish and Asian surname lists which identify registrants with commonly occurring Spanish and Asian surnames. The Passel-Word Spanish surname list, published by the U.S. Census Bureau, was utilized to identify Latinos. For Asian Americans, the U.S. Census Bureau's surname lists for six major Asian-American ethnic groups were utilized: Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Asian Indian, and Vietnamese. In addition, ballot language designation and birthplace also inform the identification of race and ethnicity. Surname matching for research purposes is not reliable for white, non-Hispanic, and Black populations at the state level and is the most reliable in communities with large numbers of residents who are either Black or white, non-Latino. For this analysis, we only used Black and white, non-Latino identifiers in census tracts with a majority or plurality of Black or white, non-Latino residents. Note: Some additional Latinos and Asian Americans may be registered to vote and not flagged by the surname databases.
6. Imai, K., & Khanna, K. (2016). Improving ecological inference by predicting individual ethnicity from voter registration records. Political Analysis, 24(2), 263-272. See: https://imai.fas.harvard.edu/research/files/race.pdf
7. For information on Assembly Bill 89 and Assembly Bill 100, see: https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/
8. For information on Assembly Bill 860 and Senate Bill 423, see: https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/
9. For more information on California's online voter registration Senate Bill 397, see: https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201120120SB397
10. For more information on California's automatic voter registration Assembly Bill 1407, see: https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180AB1407
11. For more information on the California Voter's Choice Act, see: http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB450
12. For more information on California's conditional voter registration Senate Bill 72, see: https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200SB72
13. For more information on Assembly Bill 182, see https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160AB182
14. For more information on the California Voter's Choice Act, see: http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB450
15. For the California Secretary of State Turnout rates for general elections since 1910, see: https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/sov/2021-recall/sov/04-historical-voter-reg-participation.pdf
16. See CID report, California's Changing Electorate: a 2020 Post Election Analysis of Voting Behavior: https://cid.usc.edu/turnout-briefs
17. See CID report, California's Changing Electorate: a 2020 Post Election Analysis of Voting Behavior: https://cid.usc.edu/turnout-briefs
18. For more information on BallotTrax, California's ballot tracking system, see: https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/ballot-status/wheres-my-ballot

Appendix

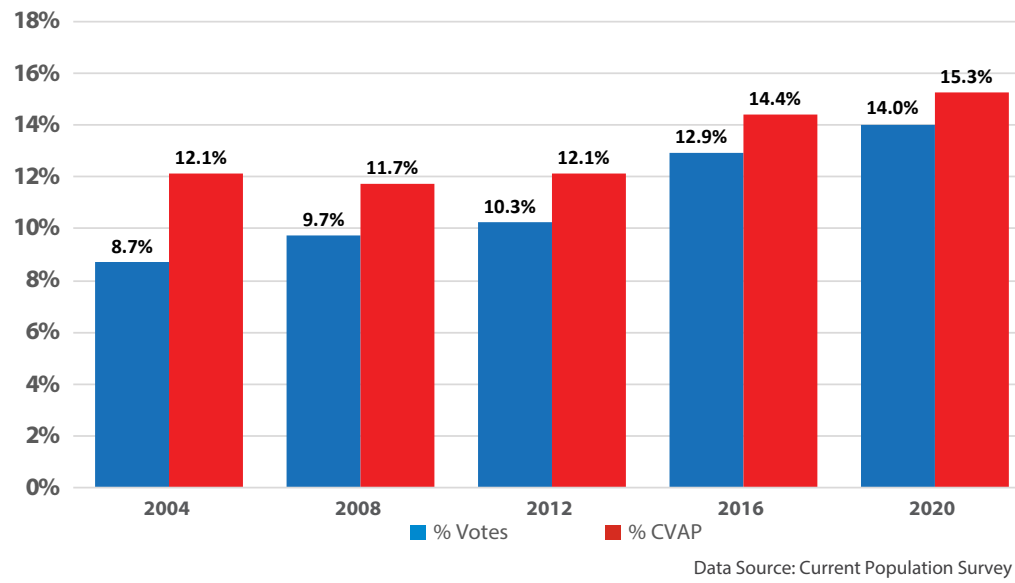
FIGURE 1



Eligible Voter Turnout: California 2000-2020 General Elections			
	Eligible Voters Total	**Vote Total**	**Eligible Voter Turnout**
2000	21,461,275	11,142,843	51.9%
2004	22,075,036	12,589,683	57.0%
2008	23,208,710	13,743,177	59.2%
2012	23,802,577	13,202,158	55.5%
2016	24,875,293	14,610,509	58.7%
2020	25,090,517	17,785,151	70.9%

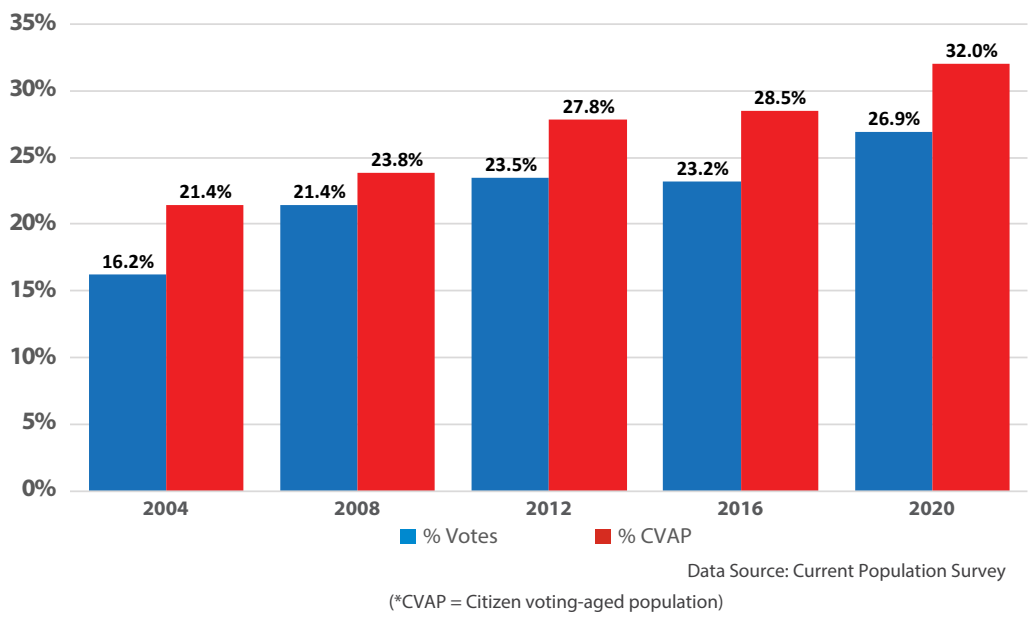
Data Source: California Secretary of State, Historical Voter Registration and Participation in Statewide General Elections 1910-2021 (as of December 2021)

FIGURE 2



Since 2004, Asian Americans have represented a smaller share of total votes compared to their share of eligible voters. Asian Americans' share of all votes cast ranged from 8.7% (2004) to 14.0% (in 2020), while their share of eligible voters ranged from 11.7% (2008) to 15.3% (2020). While Asian Americans have been underrepresented in their share of votes cast in all five general elections, the gap between their share of votes and their share of eligible voters has been narrowing. The gap was 3.4 percentage points in 2004 and was only 1.3 percentage points in 2020.

FIGURE 3



In each general election since 2004, Latinos have represented a smaller share of total votes compared to their share of eligible voters. Latinos' share of all votes cast ranged from 16.2% (2004) to 26.9% (in 2020), while their share of eligible voters ranged from 21.4% (2004) to 32.0% (2020). The gap between Latinos' share of votes and their share of eligible voters was similar in 2020 (5.1 percentage point difference) as it was in 2004 (5.2 percentage point difference). The gap between Latinos' share of voters and their share of eligible voters was the smallest in the 2008 election, with a 2.4 percentage point difference.