Voter Messaging in California: Challenges and Opportunities in an Inequitable Election Landscape

EVIDENCE-BASED ACTIONS FOR INFORMING VOTERS ABOUT THE NOVEMBER 2024 ELECTION

This action summary provides research-based information on the barriers to voting that Californians experience. This document is a companion to the report, Voter Messaging in California: Challenges and Opportunities in an Inequitable Election Landscape, by the Center for Inclusive Democracy, USC Sol Price School of Public Policy.

Understanding the barriers to voting that many Californians’ experience is essential to the development of effective public voter outreach and education strategies aimed at increasing participation in the state’s elections, including the upcoming November 2024 general election.

To inform the efforts of election officials, community groups, and others working to develop these strategies, the USC Center for Inclusive Democracy (CID) conducted a statewide representative survey of a diverse sample of nearly 12,000 eligible voters in California, identifying factors in their electoral participation. The following recommendations are based on findings from the survey.

**Recommendation:** Consider group differences in the reasons why eligible voters say they do not cast a ballot.

There are many structural reasons (historical and current) for low and disparate turnout rates, including significant differences in the amount and quality of outreach messages received across racial, ethnic, and age groups, Here, we asked survey respondents their individual reasons for not voting.

- **Most Common Reasons for Not Voting in the 2022 General Election**

  ![Graph showing most common reasons for not voting in 2022]

  - I’m not interested: 26.4%
  - I’m not registered: 17.4%
  - Do not like the candidates: 15.2%

  *Data Source: CID California Voter Experience Survey, 2024*

- **Over a quarter of all eligible voters did not cast a ballot in the 2022 general election due to lack of interest.** One-third of Black eligible voters and nearly 30% of AAPI eligible voters cited lack of interest as a reason for not voting in the 2022 general election. In comparison, less than one-quarter of Latino and white, non-Latino respondents cited the same reason.

- **Younger eligible voters were more likely to cite lack of interest, being too busy, and forgetting as reasons they did not vote in 2022 than their older counterparts.** Around one-third of respondents aged between 25 and 44 cited lack of interest as a reason for not voting, while around one-fifth of eligible voters age 65 and older said the same. Over 15% of eligible voters aged 18 to 24 said they were too busy, more than twice the share of voters aged 55 and older (6.4%).
• Among eligible voters with a disability, the top three reasons for not voting in the 2022 general election were not interested, not registered, and did not like the candidates. Just under 20% of eligible voters with a disability cited not being registered to vote as a reason for not casting a ballot, nearly 2.5 percentage points higher than the general population. 28% of eligible voters said they were not interested and 16.8% said they did not like the candidates as a reason, both around 1.5 percentage points higher than all eligible voters surveyed.

Recommendation: Address voter concerns about voting access and ballot security.

Survey findings highlighted that voters have specific concerns about voting access and ballot security. Addressing these concerns can help voters feel more confident about casting their ballot.

• Just over 30% of eligible voters have concerns about voting in the November 2024 general election. Black (36.7%) and white, non-Latino (32.0%) eligible voters had higher rates of concern than Latino (25.2%) and AAPI (24.3%) eligible voters.

• Among respondents with concerns, the top three concerns were: their ballot being counted, long lines, and ballot tampering. Over one-third of respondents said they were worried their vote-by-mail ballot wouldn’t be counted accurately, while over 28% were concerned about long lines and 27.6% were concerned about ballot tampering.

• Top three concerns that eligible voters have about casting their ballot in November 2024 vary significantly by race and ethnicity. Smaller percentages of Black, Latino, and AAPI eligible voters indicated they are concerned that their ballot might not be counted accurately than white, non-Latino (37.8%) eligible voters. Instead, eligible voters of color were more concerned about their in-person voting location being accessible compared to white, non-Latino eligible voters.

• Accessibility of voting was a higher concern among eligible voters under age 45 than older eligible voters. Respondents aged 45 and younger cited long lines, receiving their ballot, finding a voting location, and if the location itself would be accessible as their top concerns for the casting a ballot in the upcoming 2024 general election. In contrast, the top concerns among respondents aged 55 and older were related to security, such as their ballot being counted, USPS delivery, and possible ballot tampering.

• Eligible voters with a disability cited concerns about standing in a long line to vote in person as their top concern for the upcoming election. Over 35% of eligible voters with a disability said they were concerned they may have to wait in a long line to cast their ballot in person, more than six percentage points higher than the general population. Eligible voters with a disability also cited concerns about their in-person voting location being accessible at higher rates than all eligible voters (25.6% versus 19.6%, respectively).
Recommendation: Educate voters proactively and through information sources they trust.

Surveyed eligible voters shared where they find information about registration and voting—including reporting if they did not know where to find such information.

- **Official materials should be easy to use.** High use of materials from county elections offices, particularly by voters of color and seniors, underscores the need for plain and accessible language, quality translation, and readability by voters with visual disabilities.

- **Friends and family are a key information source, particularly for Latino, white, non-Latino, and young voters.** Nearly 21% of Latino and white, non-Latino eligible voters turn to friends and family, compared to 18.8% of Black and 16.7% of AAPI eligible voters. Over one-quarter of young eligible eligible voters (age 18-24) turn to friends and family as an information source, more than double the share of eligible voters age 65 and older.

- **Many eligible voters of color, young eligible voters and eligible voters with a disability need active outreach.** Only 28% of eligible voters knew that a vote-by-mail ballot can be counted if it arrives after Election Day with a postmark indicating it was sent on or before Election Day. This knowledge was lower among Black eligible voters (18.2%), Latino eligible voters (21.8%), eligible voters aged 18 to 24 (16.9%), and eligible voters with a disability (24.4%).

Recommendation: Use tested voter messages when educating eligible voters.

The survey tested five messages about available voting options to see which had the greatest effect on the likelihood of voting.

- These tested messages increased voters’ reported likelihood of voting in November:
  - A core message explaining voting options;
  - The core message plus community empowerment language (“California’s civil rights organizations urge people to make their voices heard by voting in their communities”); and
  - A core message emphasizing safety and prohibiting voter fraud (“California’s election officials have worked to ensure that all of these voting options are secure and safe with protections in place to prohibit voter fraud”).

**Core Voting Options Message**

In California, you can vote early and have options to vote. Every registered voter in California will receive a ballot in the mail about a month before the election. There are three ways you can cast your ballot. You can return your ballot by mail, or drop it off at an official location, or you can vote in person at a voting location.

Please see the full report for more information on the survey methodology and message testing.

Conclusion

These survey findings provide important information on the significant differences across voter groups in their barriers to voting and informational resources in California. While concerns about casting a ballot and barriers to voting vary across racial, ethnic, age groups, and disability status, this survey reveals targeted messaging can be a key tool to increase eligible voters’ chances of casting a ballot in 2024 and beyond.