

What Policies and Interventions Can Increase Voting Among All Californians?

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

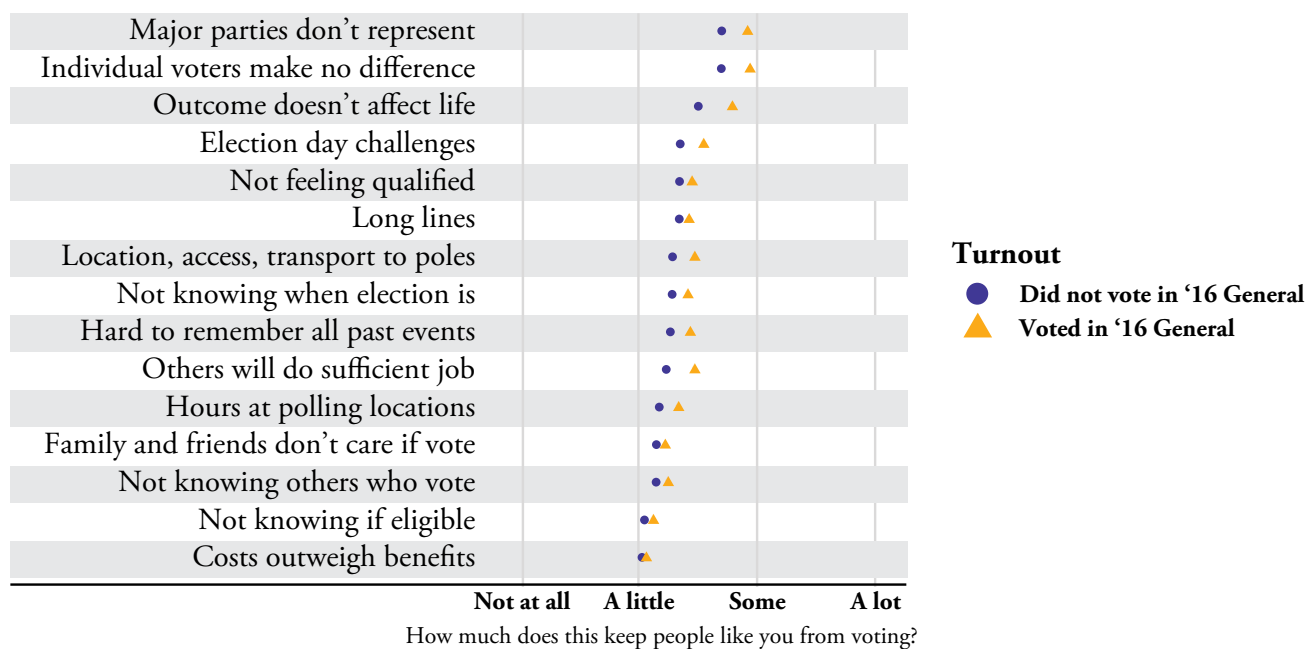
This project gathers evidence about what policies and interventions can increase voting among Californians, especially Californians with a low propensity to vote. We have proceeded in two parts. First, in summer 2018, we surveyed a diverse sample of voting and non-voting Californians about their political attitudes. Based on analysis of this survey, we concluded that feeling inadequately informed and feeling inefficacious may contribute to low turnout rates. Second, based on the results of the survey, we designed an experiment to increase turnout in two special elections in June 2019 by targeting these feelings; analysis of the experimental results is still in progress.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

To gain insight into the explanations citizens offer for not turning out to vote, we fielded a survey of Californians in the late summer and early fall of 2018. Respondents were recruited through Lucid Labs. The survey yielded 11,053 responses from citizens, 83% of whom reported being registered to vote. All respondents were asked a series of questions designed to capture, directly and indirectly, some features that might lead an eligible person to abstain from voting.

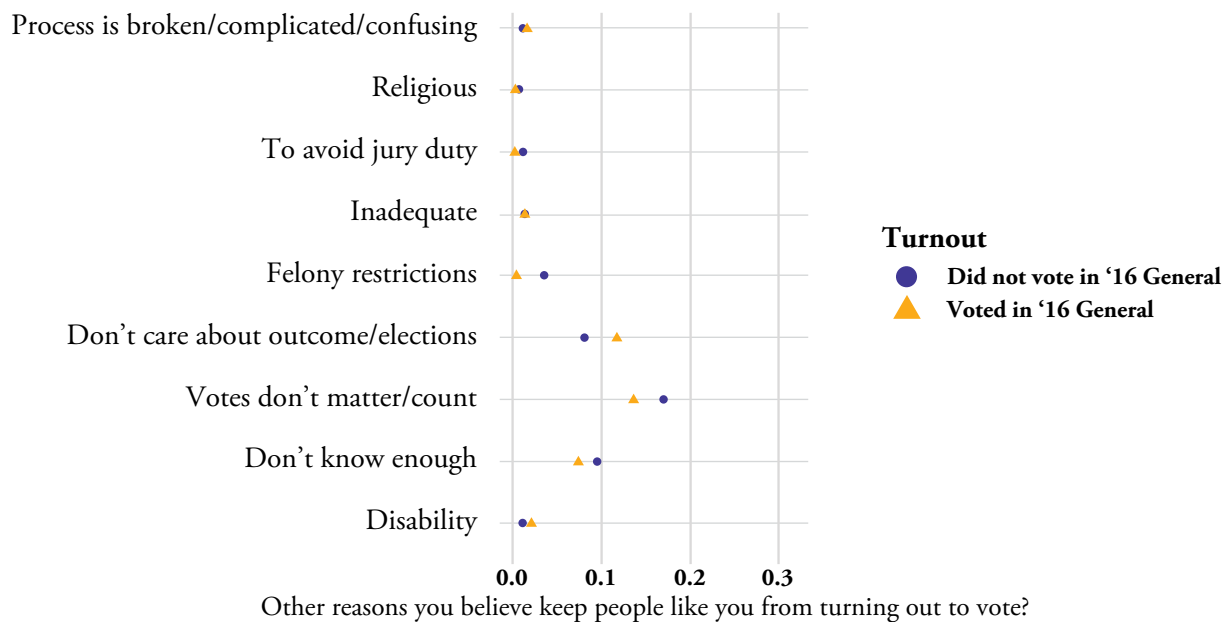
In one question, respondents were presented with a list of potential reasons for abstention and asked to rate “how much you think each keeps people like you from turning out to vote in national and statewide general elections.” The average importance of each reason is presented in Figure 1, separated by respondents that did or did not vote in the 2016 Presidential election. Voters and nonvoters’ ratings of the importance of the available reasons were very similar. For voters and nonvoters alike, the three reasons rated as most influential were that major parties don’t represent them, that individual voters make no difference, and that the outcome of the election does not have a big effect on their life. These responses suggest a lack of external efficacy (Lane 1959)—many citizens seem to think that voting in an election will not produce outcomes they desire.

Figure 1: Reasons why someone might not turn out to vote.



Further evidence of a lack of external efficacy comes from an open-ended follow-up question. After rating the impact of the reasons listed in Figure 1, respondents were asked whether there were “other reasons you believe keep people like you from turning out to vote in national and statewide elections.” Around 3800 respondents provided some answer to this question; these responses were coded into nine non-mutually-exclusive categories. The results can be found in Figure 2. Two of the most common types of responses involved a lack of efficacy: the sense that votes don’t matter to election outcomes, and a lack of caring about elections themselves. The former category includes general references to one’s vote not counting, as well as a number of references to elections being fixed, rigged, or tampered with. In the latter category, respondents mentioned not caring who gets elected and a general sense of apathy about politics. A related and common category involved the quality of options in elections—around 10% of responses mentioned that they don’t have any good options in elections, or that all politicians are corrupt or incompetent.

Figure 2: Proportion of respondents giving any additional reason why people don’t vote whose responses fell into the listed categories. Categories are not mutually exclusive



Many respondents also referenced a lack of internal efficacy (Balch 1974; Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991) as a reason why people do not vote in both the open- and closed-ended questions. In the closed-ended question, many respondents agreed that “not feeling qualified” was a common reason not to vote, and 8% of responses in the open-ended question mentioned people not knowing enough to vote. Other questions in the survey support the idea that feeling unqualified is an obstacle to voting. For example, almost half of respondents disagreed with the statement that “the average person has enough information about local government to participate in elections;” among those who disagreed, 35% did not vote in 2016, compared to 19% of those who agreed. These differences in internal efficacy between voters and nonvoters remain highly significant when included in regression models with demographic controls.

Non-voting respondents did score lower on political knowledge items in the survey than voting respondents did: those who did not know that the next Congressional election was in the month of November were 19 percentage points less likely to vote than those who did. Respondents who were able to name both major political parties were 21 percentage points more likely to vote than those who could not, and those who knew that the Republicans are the more conservative party were 26 points more likely to have voted than those who did not. These differences also persist when included in regression models with controls for a variety of demographic variables.

Taken together, the survey responses suggest that internal and external efficacy play a key role in how people justify the decision not to vote. We must use caution in interpreting the accounts people provide for the causes of their behavior, and it remains true that other forces not highlighted here, like logistical hurdles and social pressure, are important drivers of turnout. However, the ways in which people, especially nonvoters, explain their decisions serve as a starting point for the design of interventions that increase the likelihood of voting.

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

Based on the results of the survey, we designed an intervention to increase turnout among low-propensity voters in two June 2019 special elections for seats in the California State Senate. In addition to treatments targeting the efficacy-related feelings suggested by the survey, the intervention tested the effects of information about a new policy, the Voter's Choice Act, that sought to make voting more convenient. The intervention took the form of letters mailed to registered voters who had missed voting in at least one of the previous five major elections. We randomly sent these voters one of four different messages encouraging them to vote.

One message, the "VCA Information" treatment, informed the recipient of changes in the voting process following California's Voter's Choice Act, including the implementation of vote centers and the expansion of early voting. Another, the "Smaller Districts" treatment, targeted external efficacy. It encouraged recipients to think that their vote could make a difference in the upcoming elections due to the smaller districts and subnational focus of State Senators. A third message, the "Wisdom of the Crowds" treatment, targeted internal efficacy by telling recipients that elections can turn small amounts of knowledge from many people into a better outcome for everyone. A final message, the "Party Information" treatment, also targeted internal efficacy. It informed voters about differences between the Democratic and Republican parties by including small excerpts from the state parties' platforms. We sent some additional voters a control message that simply informed them of the upcoming election and encouraged them to vote.

Analysis of the experimental results is still in progress. While there are suggestive signs that receiving a letter about the election increased turnout among some subgroups, the analysis is complicated by significant turnover in the voter file in the months between our sample being drawn and the 2019 election. We hope to have drawn conclusions in time to plan further investigations in the 2020 election.

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