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Nativity and California Online Voter Registration and Turnout in November 2012

Abstract: In September 2012, the California Secretary of State made it possible, for the first time, for the state's eligible voters to register online. In fewer than 5 weeks prior to the November 2012 election, 787,337 of California's eligible voters took advantage of this opportunity. In this article, I explore the demographics of California's November 2012 online registrants with a particular focus on nativity in order to see whether US born Latina/o and Asian-American online registrants have different characteristics than those who are naturalized. I find Latino and Asian-American naturalized voters used online voter registration at high rates, but that Asian-origin naturalized voters did so at lower rates than Latinos, suggesting the need for more targeted outreach to naturalized voters of different ethnoracial backgrounds.

Keywords: Asian American; immigrants; Latino; technology; voter registration; voter turnout.

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1 Introduction

In September 2012, the California Secretary of State made it possible, for the first time, for the state's eligible voters to register online.¹ In fewer than 5 weeks

¹ This analysis is based on data provided by Political Data, Inc. (PDI), a data vendor that collects data from each of the 58 counties in California and other proprietary sources. PDI acquires voter data from individual counties at regular intervals, typically no less often than once per 4 months. When voter records are retrieved from counties, they are subjected to record standardization, validation, and enhancement. Standardization includes the application of an internal matching reference key, an internal ID tracking number, and name field standardization. Validations against death registries and National Change of Address listings are also performed. For the identification of voters who filed for registration online, PDI relies largely on the record keeping of the individual counties. In most cases, the registration method is recorded and maintained by the county registrar-recorder and can be added directly to voter file records. In certain counties, the

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prior to the November 2012 election, 787,337 of California's eligible voters took advantage of this opportunity.² 22.4% (N=176,465) of these online registrants were Latina/o; 11% (N=86,707) were Asian American; and 60% (N=472,292) were White. These numbers were similar to the ethnoracial³ distribution of November 2012 registrants overall, of whom 22% were Latina/o, 9.1% were Asian American, and 61.4% were White.⁴ In terms of naturalized online registrants, 16.8% (N=140,997) of online registrants in November 2012 were naturalized voters. Since foreign-born voters made up 19.3% of California's registered voters in November 2012, we see that naturalized eligible voters were not as likely to take advantage of online voter registration as US-born voters. Of those naturalized voters, 28% (N=36,712) were Latina/o and 32.7% were Asian American (N=42,762).

voter data is not stored in a manner that allows for direct recording of the registration method, which forces PDI to use other means to determine how a voter filed their registration. Of these counties that do not store the registration method directly most have a source code on each voter's actual affidavit number. By parsing out these codes, it is possible to determine which voters filed for registration online. There are, unfortunately, several counties that are not able to record the application source identifier into the voter's affidavit number, which make recovering registration method in those counties impossible via currently available means. Those counties are excluded from this analysis. Because this analysis includes the entire universe of voters, there is no need to consider sampling, margins of error, etc. All the numbers reported here are for all online registrants in this statewide database.

2 This number does not include those individuals who used the online system to update their registration information prior to the November 2012 election. Of those included in this analysis, 73.4% (577,905) had no vote history prior to the November 2012 election.

3 I use the term "ethnoracial" to describe these groups in order to capture the intersection between race and ethnicity. Scholars have long debated which is the more appropriate term to describe group experiences. The word race presupposes a common biological or genealogical ancestry among people. Ethnicity places more of an emphasis on cultural practices than on common genetic traits. Many scholars use the terms race/ethnicity or ethnorace to describe the ways in which factors often attributed to culture, such as language, can be racialized. In other words, ascriptive attributions can be based on linguistic or cultural practices that are not "racial" (or biological), but still can have racialized consequences. Because I believe the lived experiences of the populations discussed in this brief include both racialized and ethnic/cultural traits, I describe them as ethnoracial groups.

4 This analysis does not include African American voters because most estimates of these voters using publicly available voter information are unreliable. I hope to include these voters in future analyses. I identified Latino voters by merging the state voter file with the US census Spanish surname list. Although the use of this list underestimates the total Latino population (because some Latinos do not have Spanish surnames), the US Census Bureau estimates the surname list captures 93.6% of all Hispanics, with fewer than 5% falsely identified. For a full explanation of the list and its methodology, see Word and Perkins (1996). Asian American voters were similarly identified based on surname, and include Chinese-origin, Korean-origin, Vietnamese-origin, Filipino-origin, and Japanese-origin registrants.

Advocates for electoral reforms such as online voter registration argue that these changes open up the electoral process for previously disenfranchised eligible voters. Yet, since there has been little research exploring the impact these types of reforms have on different categories of voters, we know little about the differential impacts electoral reforms can have across different sectors within the electorate (Kousser and Mullin 2007; Rigby and Springer 2011). In this article, I explore the demographics of California's November 2012 online registrants with a particular focus on nativity differences among those who took advantage of this electoral reform – examining whether US-born Latina/o and Asian-American⁵ online registrants have different characteristics than those who are naturalized. Considering nativity is important because it sheds light on how the political socialization process can vary across generations and national origin groups.

1.1 Nativity and Voter Turnout

Little scholarly research has considered how a voter's nativity influences political behavior. Scholars exploring mobilization have emphasized how opportunities for mobilization vary across ethnoracial groups, but generally have not considered the role played by nativity (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba et al. 1995; Leighley 2001). Looking at political behavior more broadly, studies in the race and politics field have demonstrated that race and nativity can affect political attitudes and voting patterns, but it is often difficult to disentangle the two (Tate 1993; Dawson 2000; Kim 2000; García Bedolla 2005; Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Hajnal and Lee 2011; Wong et al. 2011; García Bedolla 2014).

In terms of the relationship between nativity and voter turnout, previous studies have shown that turnout among naturalized voters in the US has changed over the past two decades. Early research on Asian Americans and Latinos found that naturalized citizens were less likely to participate in elections than were US-born citizens (DeSipio 1996; Tam Cho 1999; Shaw et al. 2000; Lien et al. 2004). This pattern seems to have changed with the passage of Proposition 187⁶ in California in 1994. Pantoja et al. (2001), looking at Latino turnout in California, Florida

⁵ In this brief I use panethnic terms to describe communities that contain significant national origin and generational variation. Although I acknowledge the artificial nature of these categories, I would argue that they reflect groupings that have political meaning within the US political context, and which past research has shown reflect commonly held self-identifications within these national-origin groups (Fraga et al. 2011; Wong et al. 2011).

⁶ This initiative would have restricted access to education and health services for unauthorized immigrants and its placement on the California state ballot prompted the most significant mass mobilization of Latinos in the state since the Chicano movement in the late 1960s.

and Texas in 1996, found that naturalized citizens voted less frequently than their US-born counterparts in the latter two states, but that newly-naturalized voters in California were far more likely to have voted. This effect has remained to the present day, and has expanded to naturalized voters in other states (Barreto 2005; Ramakrishnan 2005). As a result, turnout among naturalized Latino and Asian Americans now regularly surpasses that of US-born citizens (DeSipio 2011).

We find the same trend among online registrants for the November 2012 election in California. Figure 1 compares voter turnout between naturalized Latina/o and Asian-American online registrants and US-born Latina/o and Asian American online registrants. We see that the naturalized registrants were significantly more likely to turn out to vote than the US born within each ethnoracial group. These differences are statistically significant at the 0.000 level (2-tailed).

One of the critiques of electoral reforms such as online registration is that it facilitates registration for those eligible voters who would have registered anyway, making little difference in the overall make-up of the electorate. The findings for online voter registration in California suggest otherwise, given that a significant proportion of these voters were “new,” which I define as individuals having no vote history in the voter record since March 2000. By this definition, 73.4% of online registrants were new voters and 82% of those new voters turned out to vote in November 2012 (compared to 72.4% of California’s registered voters overall⁷). Among the naturalized, 75% of online registrants were new voters and they turned out at a rate of 83% in November 2012. Among Latino naturalized online registrants, 74%

Figure 1: Nativity and Online Registrant Voter Turnout, November 2012.

Source: Political Data, Inc., January 2013 County-level Reports.

**Mean differences for Latinos and Asian Americans significant at 0.000 level (2-tailed).

⁷ As reported by the California Secretary of State.

Figure 2: Online Registrants vs. Eligible Voters, by Ethnorace and Nativity.
Sources: Political Data, Inc., January 2013 County-level Reports; Pew Hispanic Center Factsheet, “Latinos in the 2012 Election: California.”

were new voters (N=26,989) and 83% of those new voters turned out in November 2012. About 75% (N=32,005) of Asian-American naturalized online registrants were new voters and their turnout rate was 81% in November 2012.

Despite the fact that so many of naturalized online registrants were new voters, the naturalized did not register online at the rate we would have expected, given their proportion of California’s eligible voters. Figure 2 shows the proportion of online registrants who were naturalized in comparison to their proportion of California’s eligible voters. We see in Figure 2 that naturalized voters made up a larger proportion among Asian-American online registrants than among Latino online registrants. This reflects the demographics of the two communities: 68.6% of eligible Asian-American voters in California in 2012 were naturalized, compared to 27.8% of Latina/o eligible voters. Thus, it is not surprising to find more naturalized Asian-American voters registered online. But, Figure 2 shows that Asian-American naturalized voters were significantly more underrepresented among online registrants than Latina/o naturalized voters. There was only a 7.8% gap between Latina/o naturalized online registrants and their proportion of the California electorate. Among Asian-American naturalized voters, that gap was twice as large, at almost 18%.

1.2 Language, Age and Nativity

Language access may have been an important factor driving these differences. In November 2012, the online registration interface was only available in English

and Spanish (in 2013, the California Secretary of State’s office made the online interface also available in Chinese, Hindi, Khmer, Korean, Tagalog, Thai, and Vietnamese). This could help to explain why Latina/o naturalized eligible voters registered online in numbers that were closer to their proportion of the Latino eligible voter population overall. In 2012, Asian-American naturalized voters did not have access to the online interface in their home languages, which could help explain why they made up a much smaller proportion of online registrants than we would have expected, given their proportion of eligible Asian-American voters.

Age differences may also be another factor. Almost 60% of California’s online registrants for November 2012 were under age 35. Looking at the intersection of nativity and youth in Figure 3, we see that among US-born online registrants, over 75% of Latinas/os and Asian Americans were under age 35. Among naturalized online registrants, we find a greater age range, with more than 35% of each group aged 45 or older. The larger age range is likely a reflection of the fact that naturalized voters are, on average, older than the US-born. So while we cannot call online voter registration a “youth” phenomenon among naturalized registrants, it is also true that naturalized online registrants’ tendency to be older than the US-born most likely decreased their chances of registering online.

Within these broad panethnic categories, it is also important to note that online registration rates varied significantly across national origins. Unfortunately, the use of Spanish surname to identify Latina/o registrants makes it impossible, using

Figure 3: Age of Online Registrants, by Ethnorace and Nativity.
Source: Political Data, Inc., January 2013 County-level Reports.

Figure 4: Nativity and National Origin of Online Registrants, Selected Asian Americans. Source: Political Data, Inc., January 2013 County-level Reports.

the voter file, to identify the national origin of Latina/o online registrants. The national origin of Asian-American registrants, on the other hand, can be estimated by sorting by surname (Lauderdale and Kestenbaum 2000).⁸ This allows us to disaggregate among Asian-American national origin groups, and to explore possible differences in the nativity profiles. We see in Figure 4 that Japanese-American online registrants were more than twice as likely to be US born than Filipino or Korean-origin online registrants. This is due to historic differences in migration and settlement patterns among these Asian national origin groups in California. The Japanese were one of the earliest Asian-origin groups to migrate to California, but their migration levels have decreased over time. In 2011, only 2.8% of foreign-born Asians in the US were from Japan. Filipinos and Koreans, on the other hand, made up 15.7 and 9.4% of the US. Asian-origin foreign-born population in 2011, respectively (Gryn and Gambino 2012, p. 2). Thus, the number of foreign born eligible voters can vary significantly across different Asian national origin groups. Electoral reform efforts need to be sensitive to these types of within-group differences in order to be responsive to the needs of California’s eligible voters.

1.3 Nativity and Party Identification

In order to explore how party identification varied by nativity and ethnora- cial group among online registrants, Figure 5 summarizes Latina/o and Asian

⁸ Although less accurate than the use of Spanish surnames to identify Latinos, Lauderdale and Kestenbaum (2000) estimate that the Asian-origin surname lists are about 90% effective, with some variation in effectiveness across different national-origin groups.

Figure 5: Party Identification by Ethnorace and Nativity.
Source: Political Data, Inc., January 2013 County-level Reports.

American party identification by nativity.⁹ We see in Figure 5 that naturalized Latinas/os’ party identification patterns look more similar to those of US-born Latinas/os than they do to naturalized Asian Americans. Similarly, naturalized Asian Americans’ party identification looks most similar to that of US-born Asian Americans, suggesting that party identification follows ethnoracial group membership more closely than it does nativity. Much was made in commentary after the 2012 election about the degree to which the strong support among Latinas/os and Asian Americans for Democratic candidates would be sustainable over time. These similarities in party identification across generations within each ethnoracial group suggest these voting patterns will remain, at least in the near term.

1.4 Nativity, Online Registration, and Socioeconomic Status

We know from 50 years of political behavior research that socioeconomic status is the strongest determinant of voter participation (Campbell et al. 1960; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba et al. 1995). Since there is also a highly documented digital divide across socioeconomic status as well, we would expect online registration to be used by the most affluent among California’s eligible voter population

⁹ The columns do not equal 100% because it excludes individuals who selected other parties, such as the Green Party, American Independent Party, etc.

(Mossberger et al. 2003). To test the validity of this expectation, I compared the socioeconomic status of Asian American and Latina/o online registrants from Los Angeles County. Los Angeles County was selected for analysis because of its relatively high numbers of both Latina/o and Asian-American naturalized and US-born online registrants: 14,858 Latina/o and 14,391 Asian-American naturalized online registrants were from Los Angeles County. These numbers represent 21% of all Latina/o online registrants in California and 51% of all Asian-American online registrants.

To do this analysis, we used Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to plot each individual online registrant (based on their residential address in the voter file) within their particular census tract in Los Angeles County. As I was interested in looking at voters' income levels, we used census tracts because they are a small enough level of geography that they can meaningfully reflect the voter's socioeconomic context. Using a larger geography, such as zip code, would not be as accurate. The census tract colors range from light to dark depending on where the tracts fall in terms of median income, which was calculated using data from the 2011 American Community Survey (5-year estimates). The two maps that follow summarize this analysis, situating US-born and naturalized Latina/o and

Asian-American online registrants within their particular Los Angeles County census tracts.

The maps demonstrate that online registrants for the November 2012 election were not concentrated in the affluent parts of Los Angeles County.¹⁰ This is true for both US born and naturalized Latina/o and Asian-American online registrants. In fact is only 1% of US-born Latina/os and 6% of US-born Asian-American online registrants lived in census tracts with median incomes >\$125,000 per year. The numbers stay practically unchanged among the naturalized: 1% of naturalized Latinas/os and 5% of naturalized Asian-American online registrants lived in these high-income areas. In contract, 86% of US-born Latina/o and 62% of US-born Asian-American online registrants lived in census tracts with median incomes lower than \$75,000 per year. Similarly, we found that 82% of Latina/o and 65% of Asian-American naturalized voters – a clear majority for both ethnoracial groups – lived in lower income communities.

¹⁰ Each dot on these maps represents 50 online registrants located in that tract. If a tract contained fewer than 50 online registrants from that ethnoracial group, no dot appears. But, readers should keep in mind that those tracts may contain smaller numbers of online registrants from that ethnoracial group even though they do not appear on the maps.

The other factor of note in the maps is the limited amount of geographic overlap I find between Latinas/os and Asian Americans, both US-born and naturalized. Examining the population concentrations in both maps shows that Asian American naturalized voters tend to cluster in neighborhoods that include large US-born Asian-American populations. The same is true for Latinas/os. While it is true that it is likely that there are more community organizations and networks available in these areas to help eligible voters register online, the geographic concentrations of online registrants are most likely the product of the significant ethnoracial segregation that exists within Los Angeles County, which has become more racially segregated than it was in 1940 (Ethington et al. 2001). As a result, both groups occupy different geographic spaces, even within the confines of Los Angeles County.

2 Conclusion

One in five of California's eligible voters is naturalized. Given the importance and growth in this sector of the California electorate, it is critical that electoral reforms take the specific needs of these eligible voters into account. Online voter registration was a success – almost 800,000 voters took advantage of it and over 500,000 of those were voters new to the electoral process. These numbers show the ability of these sorts of reforms to improve electoral access among the state's voters.

But, when considering institutional reforms such as online voter registration, it is important to consider how these registration opportunities will be utilized by different categories of eligible voters. Clearly, Latina/o and Asian-American naturalized voters did take advantage of this opportunity, even those that were lower-income and over age 45. But, the gap in registration rates between online registrants and regular registrants suggests that there is more that the state could do in order to make the online registration process more accessible for these eligible voters. In November 2012, the interface was only available in English and Spanish, and we saw that Asian-American naturalized voters did not register online in the rates we would have expected. Now that the state provides the interface in many more languages, we should expect that to increase the number of Asian-origin naturalized eligible voters taking advantage of the opportunity to register online. For future elections, the state should also consider using ethnic and digital media to inform eligible naturalized voters of this registration option. The lack of geographic overlap between Latina/o and Asian-American naturalized online registrants suggests that these outreach efforts will need to take into consideration that Latina/o and Asian-origin naturalized voters likely belong to

separate social networks, and therefore outreach will need to be targeted towards each particular national origin population. Given that naturalized online registrants turned out at higher rates than the US born in November 2012, it is especially important that the state ensure the state's electoral system is as accessible as possible to all its eligible voters, regardless of nativity.

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