



California's Voting Age Population: English Proficiency & Barriers Faced

Claiming Our Democracy Program | March 2014

Introduction

For many Asian and Latino voters, language barriers prevent full and meaningful participation in our democracy. As California's ethnic minorities continue to grow, our election policies and procedures must adapt to meet the needs of these diverse communities.

More than 2.6 million voting age citizens in California are "limited English proficient."

Number, Share and Growth of the LEP Population¹

According to U.S. Census data, between 1990 and 2010, California's limited-English population grew 56 percent to a total of 6.9 million residents. At least 2.6 million limited-English persons in California are eligible voters, making up approximately 11 percent of our total citizen voting age population (CVAP).

Top 15 Counties by Number of LEP Citizens of Voting Age (CVAP)

Rank	County	Total CVAP	Total LEP CVAP	LEP Share of Total CVAP
1	Los Angeles County	5,691,739	966,559	17.0%
2	Orange County	1,855,568	239,896	12.9%
3	San Diego County	2,026,532	184,462	9.1%
4	Santa Clara County	1,068,326	159,007	14.9%
5	San Bernardino County	1,220,091	121,491	10.0%
6	Riverside County	1,323,838	118,326	8.9%
7	Alameda County	963,416	117,267	12.2%
8	San Francisco County	594,178	109,198	18.4%
9	Sacramento County	936,263	73,875	7.9%
10	San Mateo County	456,007	58,227	12.8%
11	Contra Costa County	680,329	51,699	7.6%
12	Fresno County	531,220	48,995	9.2%
13	San Joaquin County	406,781	44,606	11.0%
14	Ventura County	516,114	44,546	8.6%
15	Kern County	478,567	35,024	7.3%

Approximately 1.3 million LEP persons speak Spanish, while another 1.3 million speak other languages. Many of these individuals are linguistically isolated, meaning everyone over the age of 14 is limited English proficient. A recent report by the Asian American Center for Advancing Justice found that more than 23 percent of Asian American households in California are linguistically isolated.²

Voter registration among Asians and Latinos has grown in recent years; Asian American voter registration increased 51 percent between 2000 and 2008, and Latino voter registration increased 70 percent during the same period.³

Los Angeles, Orange, San Diego, Santa Clara, San Bernardino, Riverside, Alameda, and San Francisco Counties are among the top ranking for number of LEP voting age citizens.

¹ All data presented in this factsheet was calculated by The Greenlining Institute based on American Community Survey 2009-2011 3-year estimates data (U.S. Census Table B1006), unless otherwise noted.

² Asian American Center for Advancing Justice (2013). "A Community of Contrasts." Available at http://advancingjustice-la.org/system/files/Communities_of_Contrast_California_2013.pdf

³ See Asian American Center for Advancing Justice (2013). *A Community of Contrasts*.

Other counties, such as Imperial County, have a smaller number of LEP voting age citizens but they make up a larger share of the total citizen voting age population in the county (20 percent).

Election Administration Barriers to Participation

There are many language access barriers which prevent citizens from participating in an election. Below are two examples:

1. Obtaining voting information

State and county voter registration cards currently include a language preference question asking for the voters' preferred language to receive voting information. This is a smart practice. It is important to be mindful however, that the language preferences from which a voter can choose change as the jurisdiction's legal obligation to provide assistance in new languages changes. Voters rarely know about new assistance available; therefore, a voter who speaks Hindi and registered to vote a few years ago would not have had the option to select Hindi as their preference when they registered, and may not know it is now available.

It has also become regular practice to mail voter guides out on a rolling basis due to the size of the mailing. In some cases, this means that English-speaking voters have information in hand weeks before a non-English speaking voter or a voter who requires a guide in another format. This is especially true when the voters' preferences are not captured at registration and the voter has to call in to request what they need after the fact. This unequal access to information has led to instances where voters did not receive the material they needed in time to vote.

Recommendations: Promote the availability of materials in other languages through ethnic media and community-based groups serving language minority communities. If not already being done, add a preference question to the voter registration card for language AND format (i.e. audio, large print, etc). Consider allowing the voter to write in their preferred language rather than select from a limited menu to better serve language minorities as new languages become available. This could also provide useful data concerning voters' needs should you decide to provide assistance beyond what is required by law. Lastly, when following statutory deadlines for delivering voter information, be sure to apply that same deadline to materials distributed in all languages to ensure timely delivery.

2. Language assistance at the polls

A recent study found inconsistencies in the availability of bilingual poll workers at polling places.⁴ Election officials have cited challenges with recruiting enough bilingual poll workers to fulfill the demand, and have also noted that some recruited volunteers will become ill on the day of the Election or fail to show up for another reason.

Recommendations: Recently passed state legislation, Assembly Bill 817, now allows legal permanent residents to serve as poll workers. Election officials should revise their outreach strategies and poll worker application materials to include outreach to these communities. This will increase the pool of bilingual poll workers. Additional best practices were included in a recent report of the Presidential Commission on Election Administration.⁵

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⁴ Asian Americans Advancing Justice (August 2013). "Voices of Democracy: Asian Americans and Language Access During the 2012 Elections." Available at: <http://advancingjustice-la.org/sites/default/files/VoicesofDemocracy-Sec203report.pdf>

⁵ Presidential Commission on Election Administration (January 2014). "The American Experience: Report and Recommendations." Available at <https://www.supportthevoter.gov/files/2014/01/Amer-Voting-Exper-final-draft-01-09-14-508.pdf>

Counties Ranked By Largest LEP Share of CVAP

