

UC Berkeley

California Journal of Politics and Policy

Title

How Can We Increase Turnout among Low Propensity Voters?

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9mq6n7qx>

Journal

California Journal of Politics and Policy, 12(1)

Authors

Hill, Seth
Kousser, Thad
Lenz, Gabriel
[et al.](#)

Publication Date

2020

DOI

10.5070/P2cjpp1150409

Copyright Information

Copyright 2020 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed



RESEARCH

HOW CAN WE INCREASE TURNOUT AMONG LOW PROPENSITY VOTERS?

Seth Hill (UC San Diego)

Thad Kousser (UC San Diego)

Gabriel Lenz (UC Berkeley)

Mackenzie Lockhart (UC San Diego)

Elizabeth Mitchell (UC Berkeley)

Abstract. How can we increase voter turnout among low-propensity voters? Researchers and practitioners have found interventions that increase voter turnout, but these interventions tend to increase turnout among individuals already likely to vote, and therefore appear to exacerbate existing inequalities in participation. This project developed and tested an intervention designed to encourage people with a lower prior likelihood of voting into the electorate. First, in summer 2018, we surveyed a diverse sample of voting and non-voting Californians about their political attitudes. We concluded that feeling inadequately informed and feeling inefficacious may contribute to low turnout rates. Based on the results of the survey, we designed messages to address these feelings and tested them in an experiment to increase turnout in two special elections in June 2019 by targeting these sentiments among people with infrequent prior turnout records. Letters with information and encouragement about the voting process did not increase turnout in the subsequent election. We conclude that further work is needed to identify interventions that successfully increase turnout among low-propensity voters.



Introduction

Understanding voter turnout is a longstanding goal of political science research. Foundational work highlights the role of resources: people are more likely to vote when they have the time, money, and civic skills they need to engage with politics (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). More recently, as political scientists have turned to experimental methods to study turnout, interest has shifted to psychological factors. Researchers and practitioners have found interventions that increase voter turnout by increasing social pressure to vote (Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008) and by reminding voters of the closeness of an election or their civic duty to participate (Gerber and Green 2000).

Though these interventions successfully increase voter turnout, they increase turnout most among individuals already likely to vote, and therefore appear to exacerbate existing inequalities in participation (Enos, Fowler, and Vavreck 2014). How can we increase voter turnout among low-propensity voters? To answer this question, we first fielded a survey asking a sample of Californians to rate the importance of a variety of factors in people's decision to abstain from voting. We asked respondents about logistical hurdles to voting, which could be overcome with traditional resource-based explanations of turnout, as well as psychological deterrents like a lack of social pressure. Finally, based on work on political efficacy (Verba and Almond 1963; Finkel 1985), we suspected that people may not vote because they do not believe voting can produce outcomes they desire. We therefore included questions related to the importance of internal and external political efficacy.

Based on the results of the survey, we fielded an experiment designed to increase turnout among low-propensity voters. A special election in June 2019 provided the opportunity to test messages targeting logistical and psychological determinants of voting. Elections took place in two California State Senate Districts: a Southern California district within Los Angeles County with lower past turnout, and a rural Northern California district with higher past turnout. The Northern California district contained a mixture of counties that had and had not implemented the Voter's Choice Act, a suite of reforms intended to make voting more convenient. We were therefore able to test messages on populations with different historic turnout records and different logistical barriers to voting.

Survey

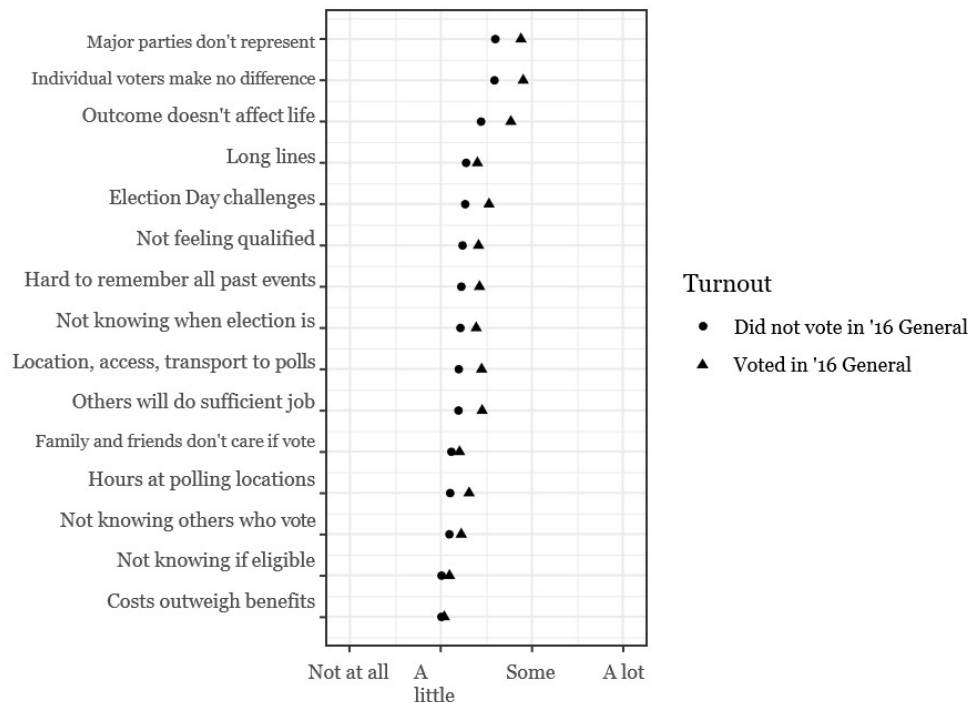
To gain insight into the explanations citizens offer for not turning out to vote, we fielded a survey of Californians in the late summer and early fall of 2018. Respondents were recruited through Lucid. The survey yielded 11,053 responses from citizens, 83% of whom reported being registered to vote. 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.

Our sample frame is the citizen voting age population of California, based on the characteristics of that frame reported in the 2016 American Community Survey. So that our sample of respondents would reflect this larger population, we sampled to meet targets of respondents matching the distributions of key demographic characteristics of voting age citizens: gender, age, education levels, race, ethnicity, and region. We created survey weights based on those targets, using gender on its own, the joint distribution of age by education (our categories for the ages of respondents are 18-24, 25-44, 45-64, and 65 and older, and for education they are high school or less, some college, Bachelor's, or graduate degree) and the joint distribution of race by ethnicity (our categories for race are White, Black, Asian, and Other, and our

categories for ethnicity are Hispanic or Not Hispanic). All of our reported results incorporate these weights.

We first presented respondents with a list of potential reasons for abstention and asked them 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 into respondents who did and did not vote in the 2016 Presidential election. Voters and nonvoters’ ratings of the importance of the available reasons were 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.

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 3,800 respondents



How much does this keep people like you from voting?

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

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 actually 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.

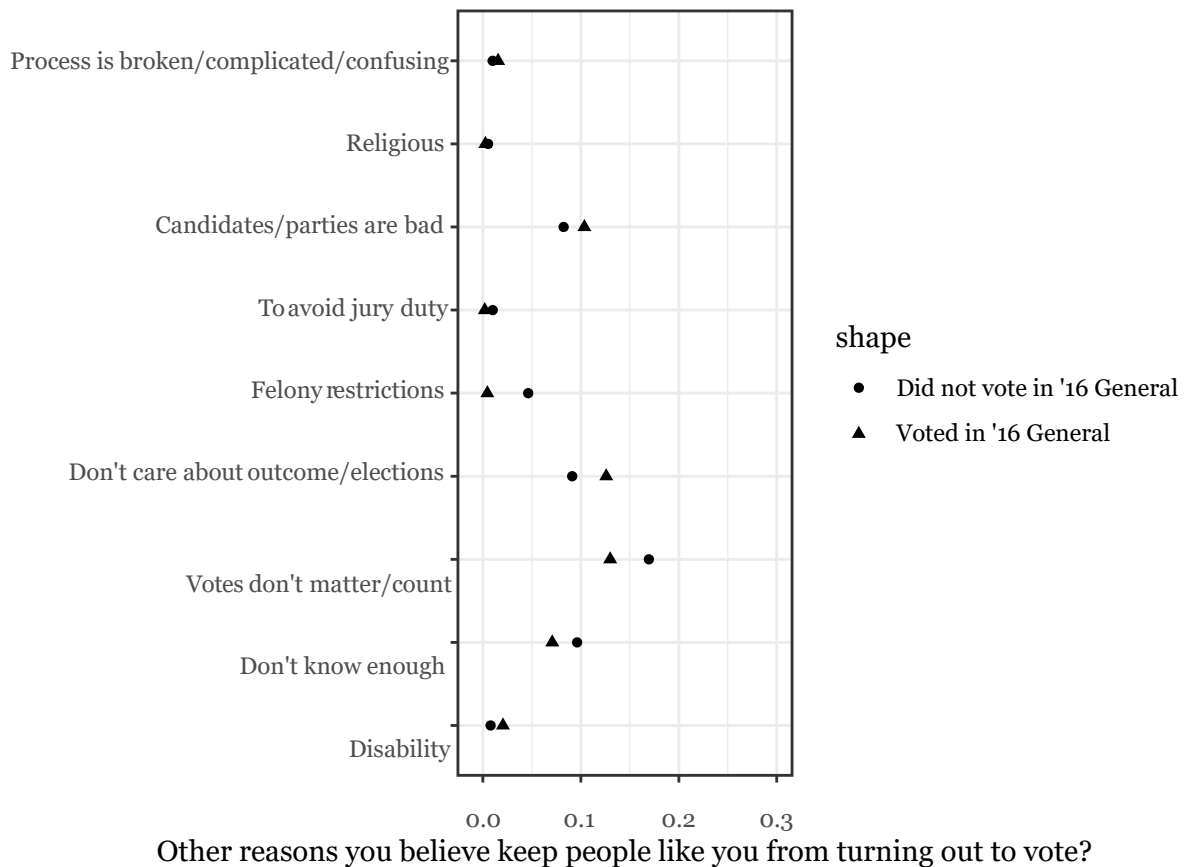


Figure 2: Proportion of respondents giving any additional reason why people don't vote whose responses fell into the listed categories. Categories are not mutually exclusive.

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 displayed in Figure 1, many respondents agreed that “not feeling qualified” was a common reason not to vote, and 8% of responses in the open-ended follow-up 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.”



Although nonvoters rate external and internal efficacy as reasons why people like them don't vote, Figure 1 shows that voters generally rate these as greater obstacles than nonvoters. This pattern suggests that voters and nonvoters are simply reporting widely-shared reasons for nonvoting, reasons they may have seen or heard in the media, and not the actual reasons they are not voting. Indeed, research has long since shown that people cannot accurately report on the reasons for their behaviors and instead tend to report popular explanations for their behaviors (Nisbett and Wilson 1977). Voters may be more exposed to the media than nonvoters and so may endorse these explanations at higher rates than nonvoters.

In the open-ended responses, however, nonvoters are more likely than voters to say that "votes don't matter" or "don't count." They are also more likely to mention "not knowing enough." We also find that people who say the average person does not have enough information about local government to participate in elections are less likely to vote. Among those who said this, 41% did not vote in 2016, compared to 24% of those who said otherwise. These differences in internal efficacy between voters and nonvoters remain highly significant when included in regression models with demographic controls.

Non-voting respondents also scored 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 24 percentage points less likely to vote than those who did. Respondents who were able to name both major political parties were 26 percentage points more likely to vote than those who could not, and those who knew that the Republicans are the more conservative party were 31 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 explain the decision not to vote. These responses do not necessarily reflect the causal processes leading to our respondents' turnout; we must use caution in interpreting the accounts people provide for the causes of their behavior (Nisbett and Wilson 1977), and other forces not highlighted here, like logistical hurdles and social pressure, are important drivers of voting. 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.

Field Experiment

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. We collaborated with the non-partisan government reform group California Common Cause to deliver this intervention. The intervention took the form of letters (shown in the Appendix) 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. 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 (VCA), that sought to make voting more convenient.

The study population consisted of all voters registered in the two California State Senate Districts holding special elections (Districts 1 & 33) who had missed voting in at least one of the previous five major elections. This amounted to a total of 793,215 eligible participants. Of these, 253,788 participants were assigned to receive a treatment or placebo treatment letter; the remainder of the eligible participants served as a control group.

The first message was a “Smaller Districts” treatment and 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 second 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 third message, the “Party Information” treatment, informed voters about differences between the Democratic and Republican parties by including small excerpts from the state parties’ platforms. Finally, 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. We sent some additional voters a “placebo” message that simply informed them of the upcoming election and encouraged them to vote. The Appendix shows the wording of the letters. We timed the letters so that respondents received them about five days before election day (which we confirmed by mailing letters to two of the authors).

In assigning participants to treatment conditions, we divided participants into blocks based on district, birth year, and level of turnout in prior elections. Participants were eligible for different treatment conditions depending on their county and State Senate District of residence. In all, 70,270 participants received the placebo treatment letter, 43,010 received the VCA Information treatment, 53,544 received each of the Wisdom of the Crowds and Smaller Districts treatment, and 33,419 received the Party Information treatment.

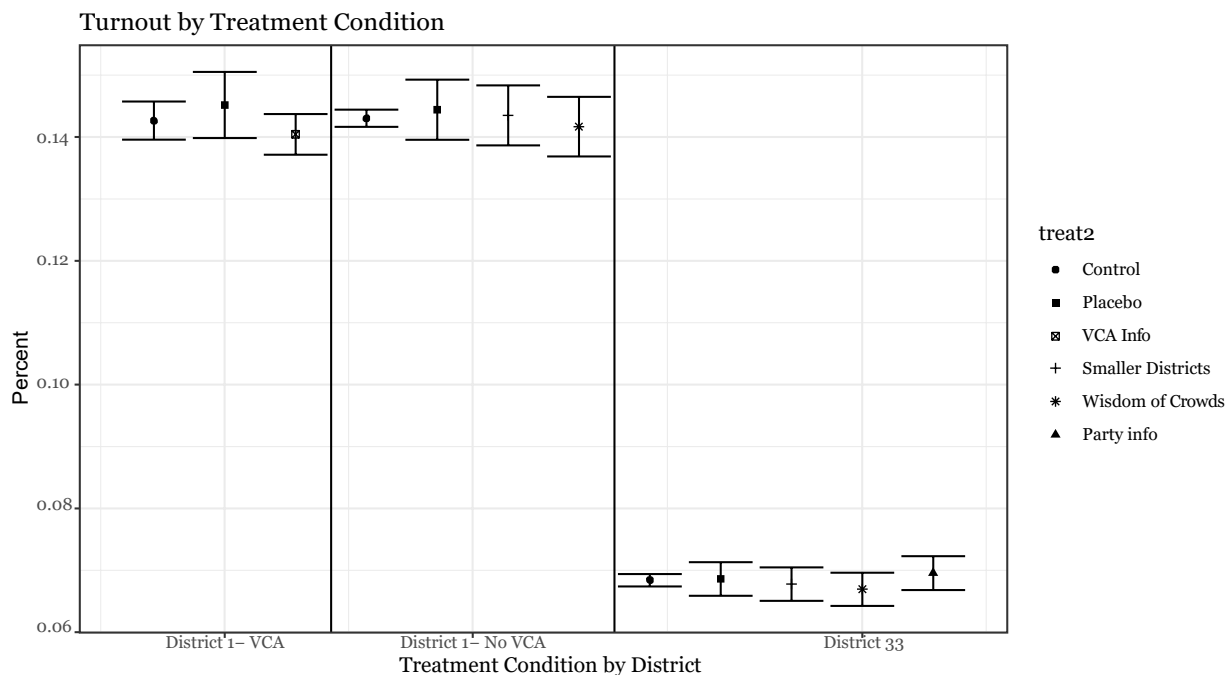




Figure 3: Turnout by District and Treatment Condition. The figure shows the treatment effect estimates in District 1 (rural) and District 33 (LA County). Voter's Choice Act (VCA) was only implemented in two counties in District 1, so the figure shows separately the District 1 results for these two counties and for the remaining Non-VCA counties. VCA was not implemented in District 33. In all three districts, the figure shows that the treatments did not increase turnout noticeably from the control condition. It also shows much higher rates of turnout in the more rural District 1 than the urban District 33.

Figure 3 presents the experimental results, showing the level of turnout in each district and treatment condition. It shows the District 1 results separately for the two counties that implemented VCA and the remaining counties that did not. The figure suggests that the treatment conditions did not differ significantly from one another in their turnout rates, nor from the placebo treatment. In every case, voters turned out at slightly higher rates in the placebo condition relative to the control condition, though the differences are not statistically significant. The condition in which we informed participants about the party platforms had higher turnout than the other conditions, but again the differences are substantively small and not statistically significant at conventional levels.

To confirm these findings, we pooled all treatments and analyzed the results using OLS regressions of turnout on an indicator for receiving any of the treatment letters. Table 1 shows these estimates. The simplest specification includes only State Senate District controls; the three further specifications add controls for prior turnout, gender, party, and randomization block.¹ The final model applies the fourth specification to especially low-propensity voters, defined as those who had voted in half or fewer of the previous five major elections.

Across the four specifications, the coefficients on the treatment indicator are small and precisely estimated. Results are substantively similar when analyses are repeated for each individual treatment condition within each district: though coefficients differ slightly in sign and magnitude across specifications, no treatment has a robust effect on turnout in either direction. We therefore cannot conclude that any treatment had an effect on turnout.



Conclusion

This article investigated how we can increase turnout among low propensity voters. We first presented exploratory results from a survey of California voters and nonvoters. In the survey, many respondents suggested that people do not vote because they are not adequately informed and do not feel that elections will produce the outcomes they desire. In responses to open-ended questions, nonvoters were more likely to mention these reasons than were voters, a pattern that held up with standard control variables. Additionally, lack of knowledge about basic political facts, such as being able to name the two major parties in the US, strongly predicted turnout.

Dependent variable: Turnout in 2019 Special Election

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Treatment	-0.0002 (0.001)	-0.0001 (0.001)	-0.0003 (0.001)	-0.0004 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Observations	738,529	738,524	738,524	738,524	476,133
R ²	0.015	0.086	0.124	0.124	.036
Adjusted R ²	0.015	0.086	0.124	0.124	.035
District control	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Turnout control		✓	✓	✓	✓
Turnout x treatment		✓	✓	✓	✓
Block fixed effects			✓	✓	✓
Gender & party control			✓	✓	✓
Gender and party x treatment				✓	✓
Low turnout only					✓

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 1: Results of regressions of turnout in the 2019 special election on treatment conditions and control variables. All treatments are pooled together with the placebo condition. All models contain District 33 and District 1 counties pooled together, excluding the 2 counties implementing the VCA. Model 5 estimates are only from those who had voted in less than half of the previous five major elections for which they were eligible. *Models 2, 3, and 4 were registered prior to analysis.

We drew on these survey results to develop messages targeting feelings of inadequacy and inefficacy. A field experiment testing these messages yielded precisely-estimated null effects: our intervention did not increase turnout among low-propensity voters. Though our survey demonstrates that many nonvoters justify their abstention with references to political efficacy, the results of our intervention suggest that messages targeting feelings of efficacy were not effective. Of all the treatments, the letter informing respondents about the platforms of the two parties showed the most promise, but this result could have arisen by chance. Nevertheless, helping voters learn what they need to know to feel confident enough to vote may be worth pursuing in follow up studies. Further work is needed to develop interventions that successfully encourage low-propensity voters into the electorate.

¹Specifications 2-4 were preregistered here. We include covariate interactions with treatment (Lin 2013). We centered the control variables so that they have mean zero, including indicator variables. As a result, we can interpret the estimates as the average treatment effect even when we include treatment interactions with covariates.



References

- Balch, George I. 1974. "Multiple Indicators in Survey Research: The Concept "Sense of Political Efficacy"." *Political Methodology*, 1–43.
- Brady, Henry E, Sidney Verba, and Kay Lehman Schlozman. 1995. "Beyond SES: A resource model of political participation." *American Political Science Review* 89 (2): 271–94.
- Enos, Ryan D., Anthony Fowler, and Lynn Vavreck. 2014. "Increasing Inequality: The Effect of Govt Mobilization on the Composition of the Electorate." *The Journal of Politics* 76 (1): 273–88.
- Finkel, Steven E. 1985. "Reciprocal effects of participation and political efficacy: A panel analysis." *American Journal of Political Science*, 891–913.
- Gerber, Alan S., Donald P. Green, and Christopher W Larimer. 2008. "Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment." *American Political Science Review*, 33–48.
- Gerber, A. S., and D. P. Green. 2000. "The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment." *American Political Science Review* 94 (September): 653–63.
- Lane, Robert E. 1959. *Political Life: Why People Get Involved in Politics*. The Free Press of Glencoe.
- Lin, Winston. 2013. "Agnostic Notes on Regression Adjustments to Experimental Data: Reexamining Freedman's Critique." *The Annals of Applied Statistics* 7 (1): 295–318.
- Niemi, Richard G., Stephen C. Craig, and Franco Mattei. 1991. "Measuring Internal Political Efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study." *American Political Science Review* 85 (4): 1407–13.
- Nisbett, Richard E., and Timothy D. Wilson. 1977. "Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes." *Psychological Review* 84 (3): 231–59.
- Verba, Sidney, and Gabriel Almond. 1963. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.



Appendix with Treatment Letters

Small Districts

(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Election for California State Senate District 1 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

National politicians can sometimes seem like they don't represent you. State politics, however, is different. **California state senators have smaller districts than national senators, so it's easier for you to make your voice heard.** State politicians, like the ones you can vote for in the June 4 election, need to listen to people in their district, no matter what's going on in national politics.

Please vote on June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

e)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause



Wisdom of Crowds

[D33_W]

(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Election for California State Senate District 33 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

One purpose of elections is to take the experiences of millions of voters and put them together. By voting in the upcoming election, you can help your district make its choice. Even if each individual voter knows only a little, adding all that knowledge together can help make choices that represent everybody. Have you heard about the “wisdom of the crowds”?

Be part of it! Do your part and vote. Please vote on June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause



Party Platforms

[D33_PP1]
(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Primary Election for California State Senate District 33 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

Many people feel like they don't know enough about politics to vote. **But if you have a sense for what the parties stand for, you actually know more than many people!** Here are statements from each of the California state parties' platforms for office.

- The California **Democratic Party** supports “excellence in education from pre-school through college; universal, affordable health care; gun violence prevention; protecting California’s natural resources, air, and water through the use of renewable sources of energy; and continually developing innovative measures to counter global warming and pollution.”
- The California **Republican Party** supports “a vibrant, prosperous and safe California defined by a robust and growing world-class economy, strong and healthy families, and reformed and responsive state and local governments that serve all people while protecting individual liberty.”

One purpose of elections is to take the experiences of millions of voters and put them together. By voting in the upcoming election, you can help your district make a better choice. Even if each individual voter knows only a little, adding all that knowledge together can help make choices that represent everybody.

Be part of it! Do your part and vote. Please vote on June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause



Party Platforms (reversed order)

(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Primary Election for California State Senate District 33 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

Many people feel like they don't know enough about politics to vote. **But if you have a sense for what the parties stand for, you actually know more than many people!** Here are statements from each of the California state parties' platforms for office.

- The California **Republican Party** supports “a vibrant, prosperous and safe California defined by a robust and growing world-class economy, strong and healthy families, and reformed and responsive state and local governments that serve all people while protecting individual liberty.”
- The California **Democratic Party** supports “excellence in education from pre-school through college; universal, affordable health care; gun violence prevention; protecting California’s natural resources, air, and water through the use of renewable sources of energy; and continually developing innovative measures to counter global warming and pollution.”

One purpose of elections is to take the experiences of millions of voters and put them together. By voting in the upcoming election, you can help your district make a better choice. Even if each individual voter knows only a little, adding all that knowledge together can help make choices that represent everybody.

Be part of it! Do your part and vote. Please vote on June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause



Placebo

[D1_P]
(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Election for California State Senate District 1 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

Please vote on June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause



VCA

[D1VCA_1]
(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Election for California State Senate District 1 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

Our elected officials want to ensure that every eligible Californian has the opportunity to vote. State officials created the "Voter's Choice Act" in order to modernize elections in California. The Act allows counties to conduct elections under a new model which provides greater flexibility and convenience.

This new election model allows voters to choose how, when, and where to cast their ballot by:

- Mailing every voter a ballot
- Expanding in-person early voting
- Allowing voters to cast a ballot at any vote center within their county

Sacramento County has adopted the Voter's Choice model. You will receive a ballot in the mail and for more information about other voting options, you can go to <http://www.elections.saccounty.net/VoteCenters/Pages/Vote-Center.aspx>

Please vote on or before June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause