

# Humphreys College

## NEWSLETTER SUPPLEMENT

SUMMER QUARTER

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### MAJOR TRENDS IN CALIFORNIA ELECTIONS: DECREASING VOTER PARTICIPATION

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*In a representative democracy, voting is regarded as the fundamental act of citizenship. There are two indicators: (1) voter participation, the percentage of the eligible population (citizens over age 18) who vote in an election, and (2) voter turnout, the percentage of the registered voters who actually vote in an election. Voter participation has steadily declined in California and the United States. Less than 60 percent of eligible Californians voted in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections and less than one-third voted in the November 2014 gubernatorial (presidential midterm) general election.*

Many political commentators bemoan this steadily decreasing participation in elections as some sort of failure, malaise, or crisis in American representative democracy. They cite a long list of possible reasons, including:

**Fatigue and an excess of democracy.** The long ballot with dozens of local, state, and federal candidates and local and state ballot propositions confuses and intimidates voters. Since 2000, California will have held twenty-two statewide primary, special, or general elections.

**Distractions.** People are too busy. People do not pay attention to elections because of the hectic pace of modern life and the demands and obligations of work and family.

**Inconvenience.** One either has to go to a polling place or request a vote-by-mail ballot weeks in advance of an election. The traditional Tuesday election day is not a national holiday (although workers are supposed to be permitted time off to vote).

**Satisfaction with incumbents and the status quo.**

Why vote if one is happy with the way things are?

**Tyranny of the majority.** Why vote if one knows they are in the minority and will be on the losing side?

**Cynicism.** Some people believe that all politicians are crooks.

**Resignation, discouragement, apathy, or futility.**

People may feel that it is not important or is no use—nothing changes. The system is fixed by the dominant political parties, incumbent politicians, the wealthy, and vested interests.

**Alienation.** Not participating is a form of silent protest against a perceived unjust system.

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**Pocketbook issues.** People may not bother unless there is some immediate economic consequence.

**The belief that it doesn't make any difference.** The candidates advocate inconsequentially small policy and ideological differences. Critics believe that in a representative democracy candidates should advocate clearly different policy choices so that voters have the opportunity to vote for a candidate whose values closely match their own. Instead, voters seemingly must choose the lesser of two evils, and, supposedly disgusted with having no real options, they choose not to vote at all. There is also the belief that an individual's vote is but one of hundreds, or thousands, or millions.

**Voter suppression.** In some states (not California), strict requirements for voter identification seem to effectively create an indirect poll tax that restricts voting participation by people without the means to obtain the necessary documentation showing citizenship and residency.

However, an alternate theory holds that low voter turnout is not the mark of a weak democracy—just the opposite. It could indicate a strong, functioning democracy in which competing candidates compromise extreme policy and ideological positions well before the election as they seek a voting majority. Even though the candidates proclaim their differences, they position themselves to appeal to the broadest range of public opinion. To most voters, each candidate presents a not-ideal but nevertheless acceptable middle-of-the-road compromise. They are perceived as “Tweedledum and Tweedledee”—marginally different and equally imperfect. Nev-

ertheless, voter participation remains an indicator of civic engagement and the relative political influence of various social and economic groups.

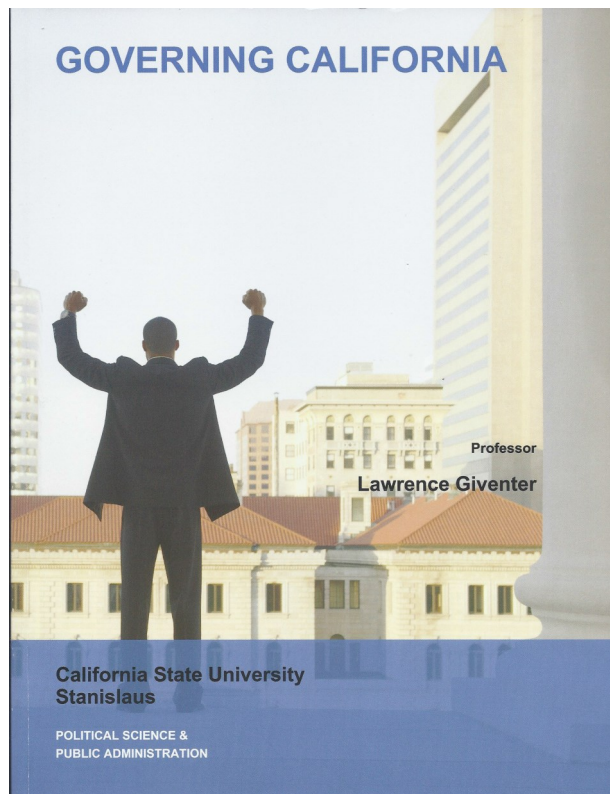
## The Coastal-Inland Political Divide

Forty years ago, California politics pitted the urbane liberal north against the megalopolis conservative south as volatile issues regarding water, the Vietnam War, and civil rights rocked the state. Now the Coastal Range of mountains separates Democrat-voting San Francisco, Los Angeles, and the north coast from the Republican-voting San Joaquin

Valley, Inland Empire, and rural California. More than two-thirds of California voters live in the coastal counties. These voters, large proportions of whom are urban, college educated, higher income, and single, tend to register as Democrats or independents. Inland voters average somewhat lower educational attainment and lower income. They have a higher rate of marriage and religious identification (especially Christian evangelical), tend to register as Republicans, and identify with conservative public policies. Therefore, California politics is dominated by its more politically liberal coast—especially Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area—supporting Democratic candidates for statewide and national office, and liberal policies on every-

thing from gay marriage, abortion rights, and environmental protection to warfare in foreign lands. It's a sharp divide. Democratic gubernatorial and presidential candidates won decisive pluralities led by Los Angeles County and San Francisco Bay Area voters in general elections from 1998 to 2014.

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## Diminishing Democrat-Republican Identification

The Democratic and Republican parties have a lock on every state elected office. However, they are losing touch with new voters, and their share of registered voters is declining. About one-fourth of registered voters now express no party preference. New voters overwhelmingly express themselves as nonpartisan and tend to favor middle-of-the-road policies and candidates between liberal and conservative extremes.

## Growing Latino Electorate

Latinos are becoming an increasingly influential part of California's electorate. Their proportion of registered voters has nearly doubled from 10 percent in 1990 to 22.7 percent in 2014. Seventy percent of the 2.5 million new registered voters since 2002 are Latino. Two Latinos register as Democrats for every one that registers as Republican.

Nearly one-fourth of Democratic party registrants are Latino, in contrast to less than 10 percent of Republican registrants. In recent general elections, California Latinos have voted more than 2 to 1 for the Democratic presidential or gubernatorial candidate. The political demography will continue to change as Latinos, who before too long will make up a majority of California's population, continue to increase their political participation



is accepted. At one time, mail-in ballots were used only by voters who could not visit a polling place on election day because of disability or travel. A California voter can now register as a permanent vote-by-mail voter who will receive a mail-in ballot for each election. About 60 percent of the voter turnout in the 2014 presidential midterm and 2016 primary elections were non-precinct vote-by-mail voters.

Despite its increasing popularity, vote-by-mail voting remains controversial. It changes the nature of campaigning. Election day becomes just a deadline for the elections office to receive mail, and political campaigns phase out during the pre-election day period rather than build to a climactic finish. In addition, vote counting actually takes longer as each vote-by-mail ballot is signature-checked. Uncertainty about the outcome of close, cliffhanger contests may extend for several days.

Further, last-minute events sometimes affect an election, and ballots cast days or weeks before election day do not reflect such developments. Everybody is not acting on the same information about current events. Public opinion surveys conducted shortly before election day may presage who is leading and influence voter turnout and results. Lastly, voting-by-mail removes an important civic expression of freedom—the public act of going to a polling place and personally casting a ballot.

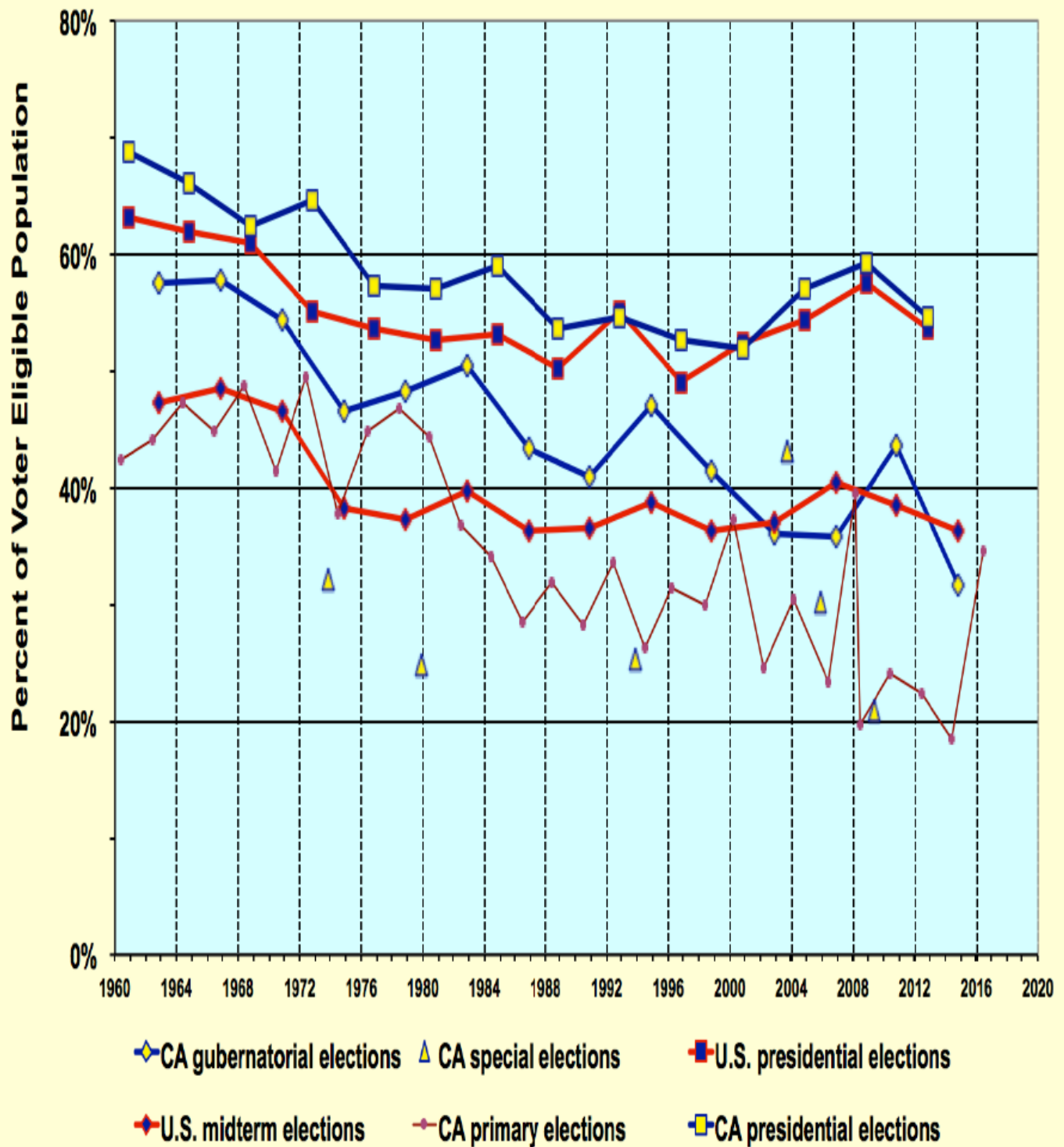
## Increasing Vote-by-Mail Voting

One of the more popular, and controversial, trends in California politics is the increasing use of the vote-by-mail ballot, formerly called “absentee voting.” The non-precinct voter is sent a ballot by mail before election day, votes at home, and returns the ballot on or before election day either by mail (voter pays the postage) or by delivering it to the elections office. Vote-by-mail return envelopes are bar coded to individual voters. The signature outside the return envelope must match that of the voter before the ballot

Source: Lawrence L. Giventer. *Governing California*. 4th ed. McGraw-Hill, 2015. ISBN: 9781308453293. To access/purchase: Go to <http://create.mcgraw-hill.com/shop/>

Chart on page 4: Lawrence L. Giventer

# Voter Participation: California & U.S.





## CALENDAR

FALL QUARTER 2016 (October 3, 2016 - December 16, 2016)

Quarter begins ..... Monday, October 3, 2016  
Last day to enroll or withdraw without academic notation on transcript ..... Friday, Oct. 14, 2016  
Last day to withdraw with partial refund ..... Thursday, November 10, 2016  
Veterans Day holiday – campus closed ..... Friday, November 11, 2016  
Last day to withdraw ..... Friday, November 18, 2016  
Thanksgiving – campus closed ..... Thursday, Friday, November 24, 25, 2016  
Final exams ..... Week of December 12, 2016  
Christmas Luncheon ..... Friday, December 9, 2016  
Quarter ends ..... Friday, December 16, 2016  
Winter recess - no classes ..... December 17, 2016 – January 2, 2017  
Christmas holiday – campus closed ..... Monday, December 26, 2016  
New Year's holiday – campus closed ..... Monday, January 2, 2017

Campus closed: Veterans Day, November 11, 12, 13; Thanksgiving, November 24, 25, 26, 27; Weekend, December 17, 18;

Christmas, December 23, 24, 25, 26; New Year's Day, December 31, January 1, 2



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