

Report points to racial disparities in most forms of political participation in California

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A photograph of Karthick Ramakrishnan. Credit: University of California, Riverside

Latinos and Asian Americans are the least likely to have a say in California's politics, during election cycles and year round. That is one of the key findings of a new [report](#) by Advancement Project and the School of Public Policy at University of California, Riverside, the first comprehensive assessment in more than a decade of political

participation at the ballot box and beyond in California.

"Unequal Voices: California's Racial Disparities in Political Participation" analyzes 10 years of [political participation](#)—from nonvoting efforts like contacting public officials, supporting campaigns and attending political meetings to voting trends in presidential, statewide and local elections. The report finds that, while people of color make up the majority of the state's population—more than 60 percent—stark disparities exist in their ability to influence politics at all levels and to shape the policies that impact their lives. The report finds that racial gaps remain even after accounting for socioeconomic factors like education, income and homeownership.

"Our political system is in trouble when some groups have significantly more say than others," said political scientist Karthick Ramakrishnan, co-author of the report and associate dean of the UC Riverside School of Public Policy. "This election cycle rightly has brought heightened awareness about class inequality, but our report raises the alarm about racial disparities in political participation that persist even after taking class into account."

"We cannot achieve a healthy democracy for all when the voices of communities of color are shut out of our political process," said John Kim, executive director of the Advancement Project. "Policymaking in Sacramento and in cities and counties across the state must reflect the diverse range of voices that now make up California."

The report was released June 30 in Sacramento at a briefing co-sponsored by Assemblymember Susan Talamantes Eggman (D-Stockton), the Asian-Pacific Islander Legislative Caucus and the California Legislative Black Caucus. Among its key findings:

Racial gaps persist in nearly all forms of political participation beyond

voting, such as contacting public officials, attending political meetings, and supporting campaigns. For example, only about 1 in 20 Asian Americans and Latinos, and fewer than 1 in 10 blacks, had contacted their public official to express their opinions compared to nearly 1 in six whites. Latinos and Asian Americans in California face the greatest inequalities in voting. For example, in the 2012 presidential election, among adult citizens, only 48 percent of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and only 49 percent of Latinos voted. By contrast, 64 percent of whites and 62 percent of blacks voted. The report finds that lower rates of citizenship exacerbate these disparities for Latinos and Asian Americans. Racial disparities worsen for all communities of color in midterm and local elections. Asian Americans were half as likely as whites to say that they "always voted" in local elections. Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, Latinos and blacks similarly reported disproportionately low rates of voting in local elections when compared to whites. California leads the nation when it comes to voting by mail, but Latinos and blacks voted by mail at a much lower rate. Asian Americans vote by mail at higher rates, but vote at lower rates overall. Latino gaps in voting are most pronounced in areas of inland California, including the counties of Riverside, San Bernardino, Kern, and Fresno. For Asian Americans, gaps in voting are greatest in the Bay Area counties of San Mateo, Alameda, Santa Clara, and San Francisco.

"This report is an unequivocal call for change," said John Dobard, co-author of "Unequal Voices" and manager of the Political Voice program at Advancement Project. "California has taken significant steps to address issues with low voter registration and turnout. But our work is not done until we tackle all the barriers that stand in the way of communities' ability to engage in democracy."

In addition to increasing voter registration and turnout, the report calls on government officials, community leaders and other stakeholders to focus on policies and strategies to expand political participation beyond

the ballot box. Among the calls to action included in the report:

Create education programs to boost civic knowledge and skills for children and adults of color, and tailor existing programs in ways that are culturally competent. Conduct extensive outreach and offer multiple opportunities to inform and mobilize communities of color, especially those in low-income communities, on policy issues. Invest in innovative ways of participation—such as participatory budgeting and deliberation models—that go beyond public comment periods to include people's voices in local governance.

The report analyzed information from the following datasets between the years of 2004 and 2014: Current Population Survey Voter Supplement, Current Population Survey Civic Engagement Supplement, National Asian American Survey, and Political Data Inc.

Provided by University of California - Riverside

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