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Voter Participation in California Varies Widely by Type of Election and by Voter Race and Ethnicity

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In 2019, 2.75 million California adults reported that they never vote in elections, and an additional 7.7 million reported that they only sometimes vote. The combined number of “never” and “sometimes” voters is even higher for local elections, in which 6 million California adults reported that they never vote, and an additional 7.4 million reported that they only sometimes vote. In addition, the proportion who reported infrequently voting in local elections (52%) is twice as high as for presidential elections (26%).¹ Local elections help local officials understand the community’s priorities and where to invest funds. Local government is directly responsible for serving the community in ways that impact daily life—for example, it is responsible for local school quality, policing and public safety, rent costs and affordable housing.

Voter participation rates vary by demographic characteristics, including age, race/ethnicity, income, and education, as well as by health status. These differences can have an important impact in local elections where greater participation by underrepresented groups could strongly influence the results.²

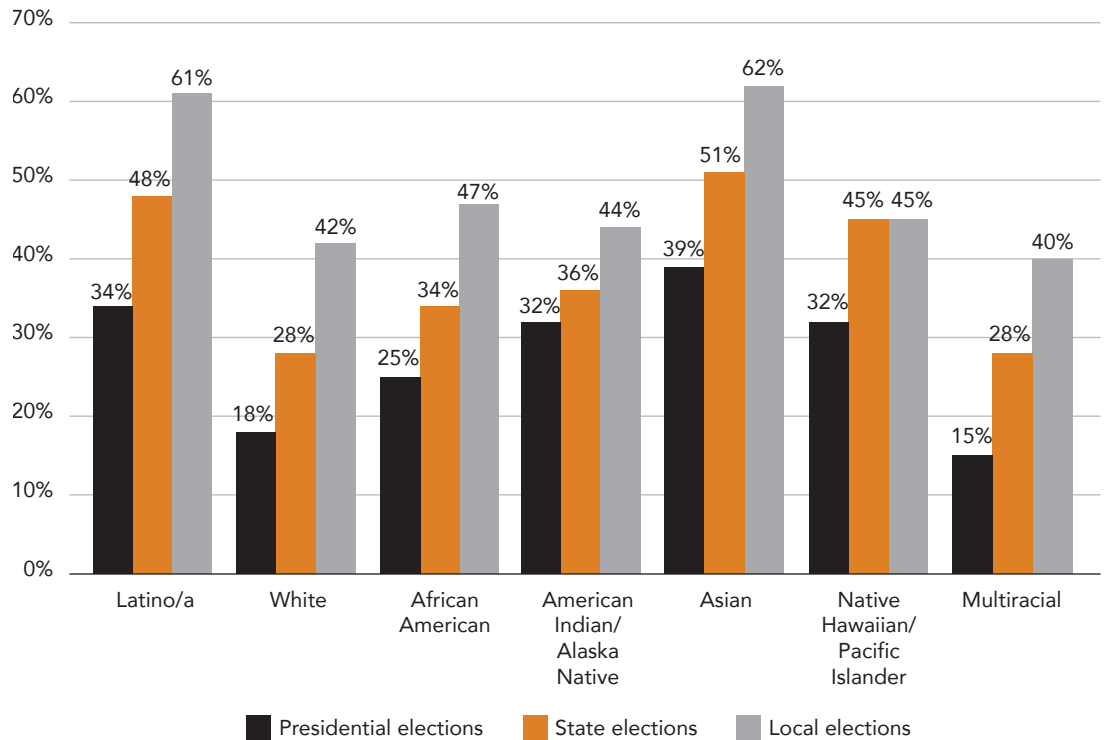
The proportion of California adults who reported infrequently voting in presidential, state, and local elections varied considerably by race and ethnicity (Exhibit 1). Infrequent voting in local elections was highest among Latino/a

and Asian adults. In addition, Latino/a adults had the largest difference between infrequent voting rates in presidential and local elections (27 percentage points), whereas American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (NHPI) adults had much smaller differences (12 and 13 percentage points, respectively). Even though voter participation rates in national elections are not ideal, the difference between national and local rates underscores how much higher voter participation sometimes is among these groups.

Infrequent voting rates also varied considerably among Latino and Asian subgroups (Exhibit 2). Among Latino/Hispanic ethnic groups, more than three-quarters (76%) of Other Central American adults reported voting infrequently in local elections, compared to about half of South American and Guatemalan adults (52% and 51%, respectively). The smallest difference between local and national elections was among Salvadoran adults (22 percentage points), and the largest difference was among Puerto Rican adults (57 percentage points). Among Asian ethnic groups, infrequent voting in local elections was highest among Chinese (70%) and Korean (66%) adults, and lowest among Filipino adults (53%). In addition, Japanese adults had the largest

Exhibit 1

Percentage Reporting They "Never" or "Sometimes" Vote in Presidential, State, and Local Elections by Race/Ethnicity, U.S. Citizens, Ages 18 and Older, California, 2019



Source: 2019 California Health Interview Survey

discrepancy between local and national elections (32 percentage points), while Southeast Asian adults had the smallest (9 percentage points).

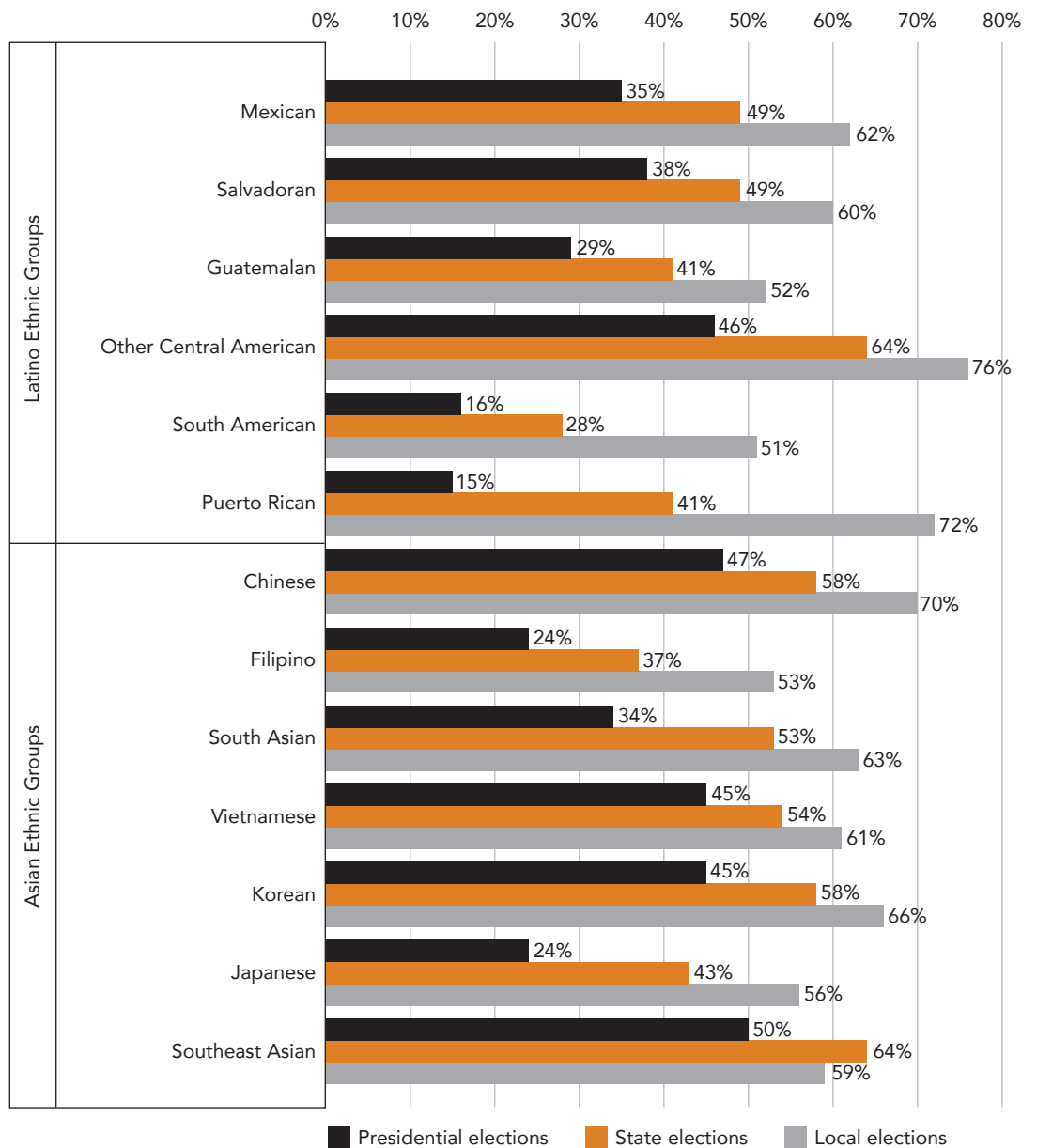
The main reasons for not voting varied when comparing U.S. citizens who do not regularly vote in national elections with those who do not regularly vote in local elections (Exhibit 3). Those who do not regularly vote in local elections were more likely to provide not being informed as the main reason for not voting (21%) than those who do not regularly vote in national elections (15%). They were also more likely to say they forgot (20% and 16%, respectively). Adults who do not regularly vote in national elections were more

likely to say they dislike politics (28%) than those who do not regularly vote in local elections (18%).

Greater involvement in civic activities, including voting, is related to better health.^{3,4} Lower levels of voter participation among some groups can reduce the likelihood that their health needs will be addressed via policies influenced by voting outcomes and may, in turn, contribute to inequalities in health.⁵ Efforts to improve civic participation of underrepresented groups could help promote policies that better meet the needs of these populations, and this may be particularly true for voting in local elections.

Exhibit 2

Percentage Reporting They "Never" or "Sometimes" Vote in Presidential, State, and Local Elections by Latino/Hispanic and Asian Subgroups, U.S. Citizens, Ages 18 and Older, California, 2019



Source: 2019 California Health Interview Survey

Note: Listed in order of largest to smallest population size, except Central American groups (Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and other Central American) are kept together.

Exhibit 3

Main Reason for Not Voting, U.S. Citizens Who Do Not Regularly Vote, Ages 18 and Older, California, 2019

Main Reason	Does not regularly vote				
	Presidential	State	Local	Overall	
	%	%	%	%	Number
Not informed about candidates or issues	15%	22%	21%	21%	3,711,000
Forgot or did not think about it	16%	20%	20%	20%	3,627,000
Dislike politics or candidates	28%	22%	18%	19%	3,295,000
Voting does not make a difference	13%	10%	8%	8%	1,401,000
Had to work	7%	7%	7%	7%	1,184,000
Not interested in government	5%	5%	5%	5%	831,000
See no difference in candidates	3%	2%	2%	3%	437,000
No transportation	1%	1%	1%	1%	163,000
Other	12%	10%	18%	17%	3,148,000

Source: 2019 California Health Interview Survey

Data

Data for this fact sheet are from the 2019 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS).

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Endnotes

- 1 Self-reported voter participation rates appear to overestimate actual voter turnout rates. For example, the California Secretary of State's voter participation statistics for the June 5, 2018, statewide direct primary show that 38% of those eligible voted in that election (<https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/sov/2018-primary/sov/03-voter-participation-stats-by-county.pdf>). By comparison, per 2019 CHIS data, 48% of eligible adults in California reported that they regularly vote in local elections. Despite this overestimation, the self-reported data provide important information about the relative differences in voting rates across groups.
- 2 Hajnal, Zoltan L. Where Does America's Low Voter Turnout Matter the Most? In *Local Elections*. *Washington Post*, 24 March 2015.
- 3 Nelson C, Sloan J, Chandra A. 2019. *Examining Civic Engagement Links to Health*. Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation.
- 4 Babey SH, Wolstein J, Charles SA. 2020. *Better Health, Greater Social Cohesion Linked to Voter Engagement*. Los Angeles, Calif.: UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.
- 5 Reeves A, Mackenbach JP. 2019. Can Inequalities in Political Participation Explain Health Inequalities? *Social Science & Medicine* 234 (Aug 1):112371.



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