



# 99ROOTZ: BUILDING A YOUTH MOVEMENT IN THE CENTRAL VALLEY

Founded in 2018, 99Rootz is a grassroots youth organizing group that seeks to encourage youth voices and civic engagement in California's Central Valley. With offices in Atwater (Merced County) and Sanger (Fresno County), the organization's name alludes to Highway 99, which traverses the Central Valley. Its mission is to develop civic leaders among the young people most affected by the social inequalities characteristic of this largely agricultural region. Providing the tools for healing and personal success, 99Rootz engages youth in activities that build their civic knowledge and skills, preparing them to lead grassroots and voter education campaigns. As a project of Power California, which coordinates statewide youth civic engagement campaigns, 99Rootz links its members to broader youth-led voter education efforts in the region and state.

Focusing on 99Rootz's membership and achievements, this research draws on surveys and interviews to illustrate the organization's efforts to civically empower its members. We share our findings in four sections. First, we briefly describe the group's origin and mission. Second, we use a survey of youth participants in 2018 to describe 99Rootz's members, the activities they engage in, and how they are being developed as leaders. Third, we summarize key campaign milestones and highlight how members increased voter turnout during the 2018 election season. Overall, our research indicates that despite being a fairly new organization, 99Rootz has had a transformative effect on developing members' capacities to civically engage their peers and affect positive change in their communities. We conclude by discussing the potential for 99Rootz to further advance equitable democratic participation in the Central Valley.

## THE ORIGINS OF 99ROOTZ

99Rootz was founded by Alicia Olivarez and Crisantema Gallardo, Central Valley natives and U.C. Berkeley graduates who are committed to advancing equity and social justice in their communities. Recognizing the dearth of opportunities for young people of color to celebrate their identities and have a voice in local governance, they sought to develop an inclusive space for young people to learn how to challenge multiple forms of oppression and to act collectively on behalf of themselves, their families, and their communities.

Seeking support and guidance from local elders, Olivarez and Gallardo opened colorful and youth-friendly offices in Fresno and Merced counties. They recruited young people through their networks and provided information about government elections and how to gain a voice in shaping policy decisions. Youth were trained to lead clubs at local high schools and to spearhead local grassroots and civic engagement campaigns. Youth members also participated in summer academies that furthered their personal and leadership development.





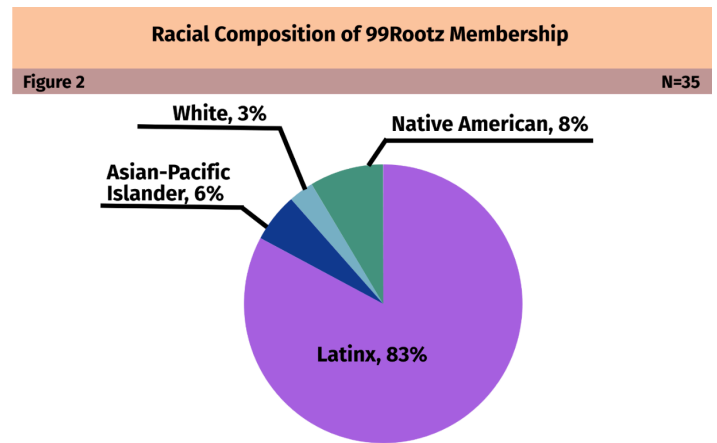
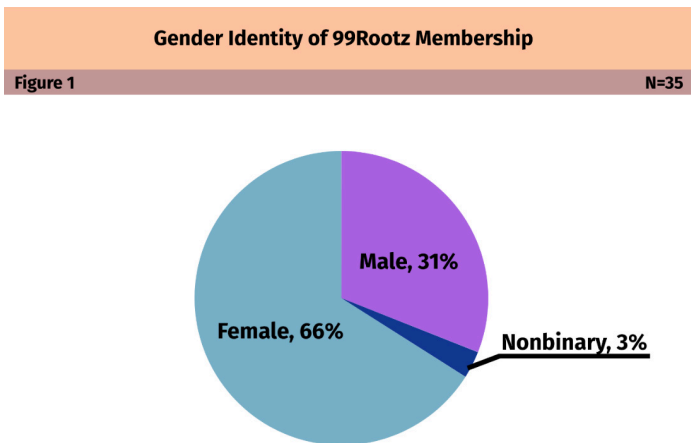
“...something that has been critical to really get the most marginalized involved, is to lead with the creation of a safe space. And to name that in our safe space, all identities are fully acknowledged. And that we stand with the dignity of all people.” –Crisantema Gallardo



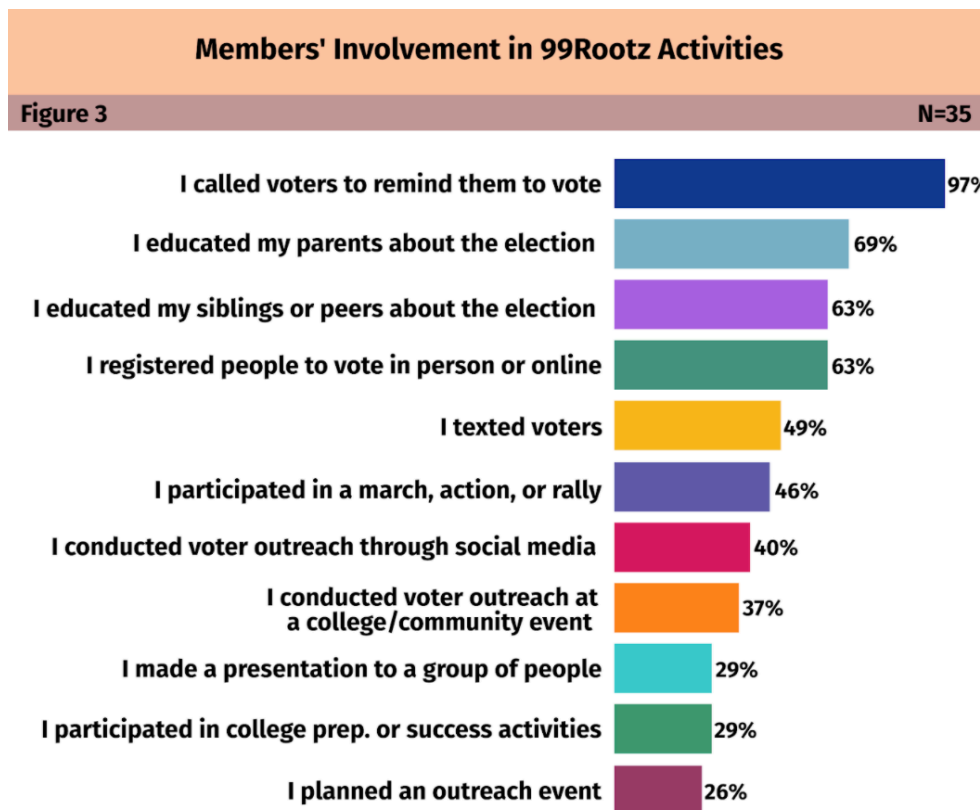
“Coming from a small town in the Central Valley, I carried a lot of shame about who I was and where I come from. My family and community told me the only option for me to have a better life was to leave. Once I left for college, people would make fun of me from being from ‘nowhere.’ 99Rootz is a direct challenge to this narrative. Our work is about building pride in who we are as young people from the Central Valley. It’s about building safe spaces in our community to be brown, queer, gender non-conforming, immigrant and rural. It’s about building pathways for us to achieve our unapologetic vision for a Central Valley that is free from discrimination and prosperous for ALL of us.”—Alicia Olivarez

## 99ROOTZ PARTICIPANTS, THEIR INVOLVEMENT, AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

During its founding year, 99Rootz largely recruited youth members from Atwater and Merced (in Merced County) and from Parlier and Sanger (in Fresno County). Many were the children of immigrant farm-workers, and others were employed in agricultural or working-class occupations. Surveys collected from 35 members during the fall of 2018 offer insights into the organization's membership. Ranging in age from 16 to 22, members had an average age of 17. As shown in Figure 1, female-identified youth made up two-thirds of participants, while just under a third identified as male, and 3% did not identify along the gender binary. Mirroring the demographics of the communities they serve, 83% of youth members identified as Latinx (see Figure 2), with the remainder identifying as either Asian-Pacific Islander (6%) or Native American (8%). Most 99Rootz members came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as 86% were eligible for free or reduced lunch in high school.



Despite being a new organization, 99Rootz offered immediate opportunities for members to get involved in a wide range of activities to educate the public and mobilize young voters. In our 2018 member survey, we found that youth were most commonly involved in calling voters and reminding them to vote (97%), as indicated in Figure 3. Most also educated their families about the elections and helped voters to register. Almost half (49%) also texted voters. A significant percentage (46%) participated in a march, action, or rally. Some made a public presentation (29%) or planned a meeting or event (26%). Twenty-nine percent also participated in a summer academy to foster college preparation and other activities promoting academic success. Since the survey was conducted during the group's first year, members' involvement in such a broad range of activities is impressive. At the time of the survey, 60% of participants had been involved with 99Rootz for at least several months (including some who had been involved since the group's inception), while 40% had been involved for less than three months.



## HOW YOUTH BENEFIT FROM THEIR INVOLVEMENT

Survey results indicate that 99Rootz helped to develop civic leaders in various ways and to different degrees. In the survey, we asked members to rate the degree to which group involvement enhanced their personal development—did it have no impact, very little impact, some impact, or a lot of impact? As shown on the next page in figure 4, the percentage of respondents who reported that their involvement with 99Rootz had “a lot” of impact on their civic skills and knowledge.

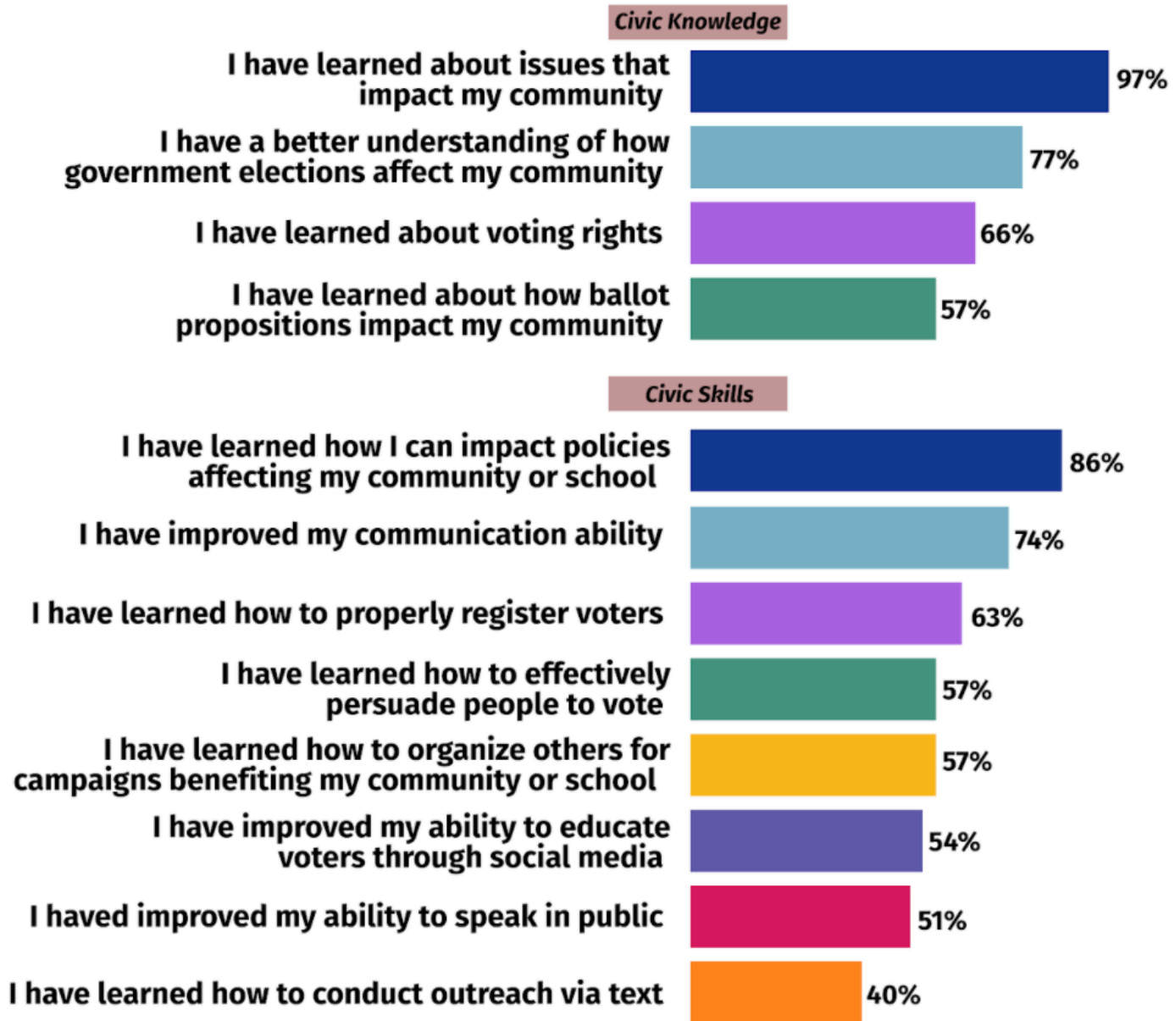
Youth organizing groups tend to provide members with a civics education rarely available at schools serving low-income youth of color. This appears to be the case with 99Rootz, as almost all youth, 97%, reported that they learned a lot about issues that impact their community. For example, they reported learning about how government elections (77%) and ballot propositions (57%) affect their communities. Additionally, 66% indicated that they had learned a lot about voting rights.

In terms of civic skills, members learned a lot about how to impact policies affecting their communities or schools (86%) and how to organize people in campaigns (57%). Nearly three out of four members reported a lot of improvement in their communication ability, and just over half said they developed public speaking skills. Given 99Rootz’s focus on voter outreach during the 2018 election, it is perhaps not surprising that members felt they had increased their capacity to mobilize their peers. While 63% learned how to properly register voters, a lot of improvement was also reported in terms of persuading people to vote (57%) and educating voters through social media (54%) and texting (40%). These results are impressive considering that 99Rootz is a fairly new organization.

## Gains in Civic Knowledge and Civic Skills: Percent reporting benefiting "a lot" from 99Rootz involvement

Figure 4

N=35





## YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING EFFORTS

To complement survey findings, we provide brief overviews of 99Rootz's efforts to create a larger, more informed young electorate and engage young people in grassroots campaigns. These efforts aim to achieve local community and broader social change by preparing young people to exercise their voice in government elections and to influence policies that impact their lives. Quite notably, the organization has taken on a range of campaigns and has kept its membership deeply engaged in addressing a range of issues relevant to members and their communities, including those that have become increasingly pressing as a result of the 2020 pandemic and racial unrest. Since the organization's founding, these campaigns have included:

### **Expanding Opportunities for Voter Pre-registration and Registration at Merced High Schools:**

Beginning in 2016, U.S. citizens aged 16 and 17 in California became eligible to pre-register to vote in U.S. government elections. Many high school students were unaware of this change, however, so the founding members of 99Rootz worked to help youth exercise their new voting rights. In February 2018, they met with Merced Union High School District board members and administrators to frame a district-wide resolution to facilitate voter pre-registration and registration in the district's high schools. Youths' efforts were successful. The resolution, passed on March 14, 2018, required schools to work with community groups to implement nonpartisan voter registration on school grounds, and it encouraged school leadership to distribute voter registration cards to students.

### **Conducting Voter Pre-registration, Registration, and Education at Merced, Atwater, Sanger, and Parlier High Schools:**

99Rootz trained members to conduct voter registration and pre-registration at the local high schools, partnering with school administration on classroom presentations that informed students about the importance of voting in local and statewide elections. Voting rights workshops were held in classrooms, sometimes in partnership with U.C. Merced and U.C. Santa Cruz students who were part of the Central Valley Freedom Summer and other initiatives. In April 2019, 99Rootz partnered with the Merced County Registrar of Voters to train core youth members, who became certified to pre-register their peers in their local high schools.



**reFUNDING Our Schools and Communities:** Since its inception, 99Rootz has fostered public awareness about how the state's tax structure determines funding for schools and other public services. Specifically, members have explained how Proposition 13, approved by voters in 1978, eroded the tax base that supports public schools, city services, and other public infrastructure. As part of a statewide coalition of community groups and labor unions, 99Rootz members have also polled young voters to gauge their interest in reforming Proposition 13. Finding widespread support for such an initiative, they gathered hundreds of signatures and helped to successfully place a statewide tax reform ballot measure on the 2020 ballot. In 2019 and the first half of 2020, 99Rootz youth in both Merced and Fresno County have continued their educational efforts, including hosting workshops among their peers, calling local young voters to encourage them to vote, and hosting virtual rallies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Expanding Voting Rights to 16- and 17-year-olds:** In the spring of 2019, 99Rootz joined a statewide network working to expand voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds. It is important for youth to have a voice and vote in local elections because adults make decisions that impact their everyday lives. To this end, several youth leaders have met with their representatives at the state capitol to share personal stories in an effort to change electoral policy. In Merced, youth developed a campaign strategy to advance a city ballot measure that would allow youth to vote in local school board elections. Through individual and group meetings, 99Rootz youth have identified potential allies, including teachers, clubs, organizations, businesses, and local elected officials. Through phone banking, they have continued to build a voting bloc of young people of color and reach young voters who support expanded voting rights. With the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, 99Rootz paused their meetings with school board members and elected officials. In 2019 and the first half of 2020, 99Rootz youth in both Merced and Fresno County have continued their educational efforts, including hosting workshops among their peers, calling local young voters to encourage them vote, and hosting virtual rallies during the COVID-19 pandemic





**Freedom of Cultural and Artistic Expression During Graduation:** As the 2019 graduation approached, the Merced Union High School School District (MUHSD) was forbidding young people from wearing decorated caps, which youth leaders saw as a form of cultural and artistic expression, during the ceremony. Hoping to reverse that policy, 99Rootz members met with the MUHSD board and superintendent to gain permission to wear decorated graduation caps. They also collected around 700 online and in-person signatures from Merced students. As a result of these student efforts, the school board decided to allow each high school's principal to decide whether youth could wear decorated caps at graduation. In June 2019, Atwater High School students became the first in MUHSD to decorate their graduation caps.

**Four Elements Campaign:** In 2019, 99Rootz launched an ongoing campaign to address lack of access to clean and safe drinking water, as well as exposure to pesticides. While policy action is still under discussion, 99Rootz has started to raise awareness about these environmental justice issues through arts and cultural workshops. In partnership with community allies, youth leaders in both Merced and Fresno County will use youth-led participatory action research to identify and support promising local campaigns and solutions.

**Supporting essential workers during Covid-19:** 99Rootz supports the demands and protection of all essential workers and undocumented workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. These demands include personal protection gear and sanitation in workplaces, hazard pay and paid leave, and expanding testing and health care. As allies to other statewide efforts, 99Rootz supports the Heroes Act and demands that legislators pass federal relief for essential workers, families, and the elderly. 99Rootz has collaborated with other organizations in the Central Valley and held rallies online and in person in Fresno County to support health care workers, consistently demanding that legislators put people over profit. One notable action involved supporting workers in Atwater, California. After city officials passed a "business sanctuary" resolution, which defied California state guidelines for reopening business and churches during the pandemic, they received a letter from the state that explained Atwater would not receive money from the Coronavirus Relief Fund. 99Rootz youth members and supporters submitted public comments to the Atwater City Council to rescind the sanctuary business resolution so that those most impacted could receive money from the Coronavirus Relief Fund.

**Counselors Not Cops:** 99Rootz youth members have made demands of the Merced Union High School District to remove school resource officers (SROs) from school campuses. In Merced County, there are a total of seven SROs in the local high schools, which costs about \$892,830 annually, including salaries, benefits, and other expenses. In June 2020, 99Rootz youth members, followers, and allies sent emails and comments to school board members urging the removal of SROs, arguing that they contributed to the school-to-prison pipeline and the criminalization of Black and indigenous students of color. Youth demands also included redirecting funding to counselors, peer-to-peer mental health groups, and student lounges; providing resources for undocumented students and their families; establishing scholarships for black students; and mandating ethnic studies as a graduation requirement.

**Keep Families Home:** In July 2020, 99Rootz met with elected officials in Merced County to ensure that families suffering economic hardships could not be evicted from their homes during the COVID-19 pandemic. 99Rootz demanded that State Senator Anna Caballero support AB-1436, which would protect families from evictions and “keep them home.” 99Rootz collaborated with the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability to organize a caravan in which community members posted signs on their cars and drove around Senator Caballero’s office. The caravan allowed for families and residents to safely shed light on housing inequalities in Merced. On social media, 99Rootz urged followers to tag Senator Caballero’s accounts to posts highlighting why AB-1436 was important for our communities.



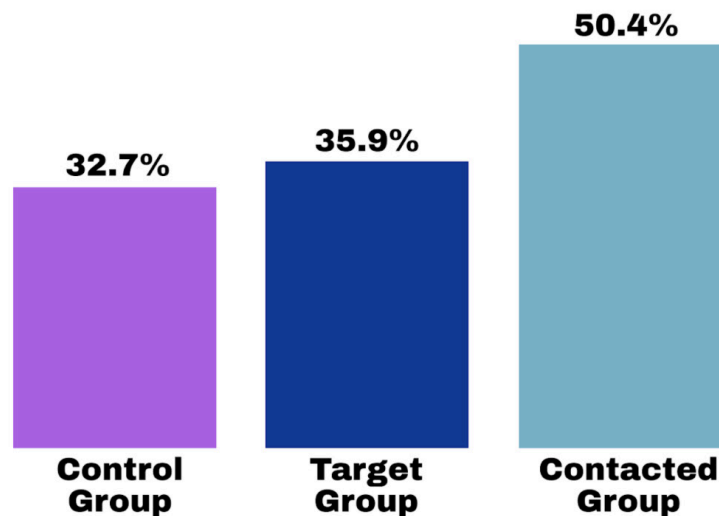
## 99ROOTZ CIVIC ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS INCREASED YOUNG VOTER TURNOUT

As part of Power California, 99Rootz members have sought to mobilize eligible young residents to vote. 99Rootz has devoted significant energy to emphasizing the importance of voting and increasing young people’s commitment to getting out the vote. Even if members cannot vote themselves because they are under the age of 18 or are non-citizens, they have learned how to enhance democratic representation in their communities by educating voters about the voting process through presentations, social media, phone, and text messaging.

These efforts had an extraordinary impact on voter turnout, as measured by an experiment we conducted during the 2018 election. We compared predicted voter turnout between a randomly selected “control group” of voters aged 18-34 who were not targeted for outreach and those of the same age who received an informative phone call. Recognizing that there were other simultaneous efforts by partisan political campaigns to get out the vote during this election season, this experiment measured the “added value” of youth-led efforts. Our findings show that compared to the control group’s 32.7% predicted turnout, those targeted for outreach (whether or not they answered the phone) averaged a predicted turnout rate of 35.9%. In other words, 99Rootz increased overall turnout in target communities by an estimated 3.2 percentage points. More significantly, those who were successfully reached by phone averaged a predicted turnout rate of 50.4%. This means that peer-initiated phone conversations resulted in an estimated 17.7 percent increase in turnout.<sup>1</sup> This research suggests that when 99Rootz members spoke to young voters on the phone, they made a convincing case for voting.

### The Impact of 99Rootz Phone Banking Efforts on Turnout Among Voters Aged 18 to 34

Figure 5

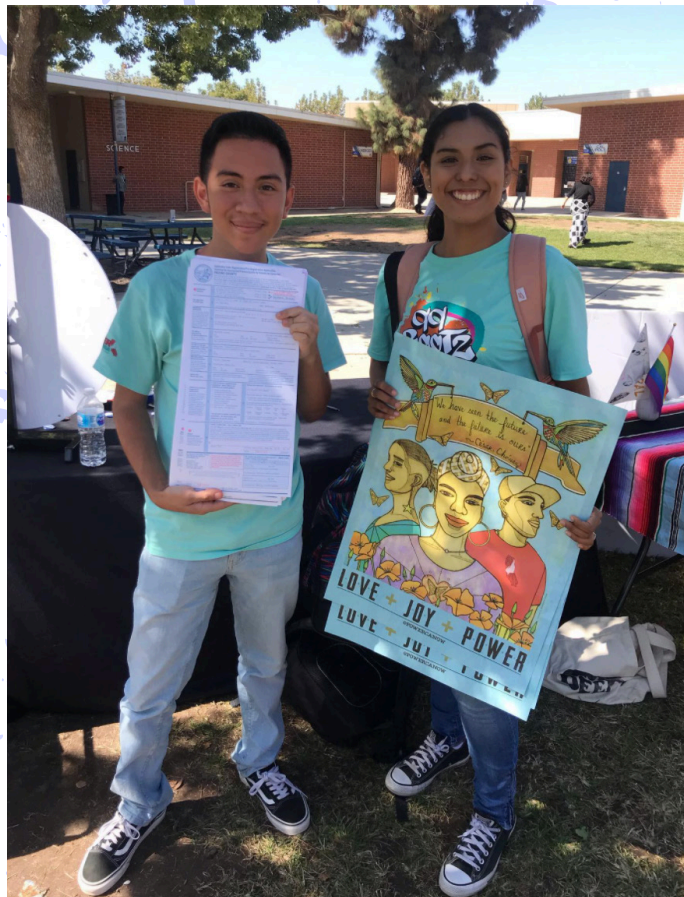


<sup>1</sup> These percentages are based on the results of OLS and two-staged least squares regression analyses that control for age, gender, prior voting history, Democratic Party registration, age, number of registered voters per household, voting method (poll vs. mail), and zip code characteristics.



## THE LASTING IMPACT OF YOUTHS' CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN 99ROOTZ

Since its inception in 2018, 99Rootz has expanded meaningful opportunities for its young leaders to address community concerns. Through youth-led campaigns, young people are learning how to navigate government decision-making processes and exert their voice. Because of this formative experience, 99Rootz members are likely to continue seeking to improve their communities as they become older adults, serving as role models for future cohorts of young people. Additionally, youth-led voter outreach is also likely to boost overall civic engagement for years to come. Given the tremendous success and visibility of 99Rootz's campaign efforts, the group is likely to have a lasting impact on the Central Valley's economic and political investment in young people and their leadership in local governance. As such, 99Rootz serves as a model for training young leaders to advance social justice and civic engagement in low-income, immigrant, and racially diverse communities.



The USC Equity Research Institute (ERI) is a research unit within the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts & Sciences. Veronica Terriquez is an Associate Professor of Sociology at UCSC and a ERI faculty affiliate. Angelina Santiago is a graduate of UC Santa Cruz (class of 2019) and a Merced County native. Photo Credits: 99Rootz. Design: Jonathan Sanchez, UC Santa Cruz Sociology, Class of 2021

**USC**Dornsife  
*Equity Research Institute*