

Orange County's Diverse Young Voters Exercise their Voice at the Ballot Box



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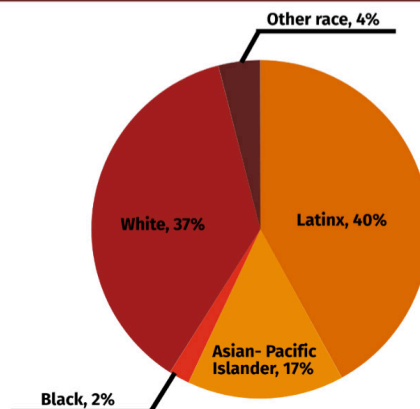
Orange County's growing, racially diverse young electorate is exercising increased power at the ballot box and thus inserting its voice into local politics. To inform efforts to increase voter turnout, this report describes the young voting population aged 18-34 and highlights the roles of civic engagement groups in preparing diverse young leaders to register and mobilize their peers to vote. Specifically, it demonstrates the effectiveness of Integrated Voter Engagement (IVE) approaches—a long-term, research-backed strategy that goes beyond Get Out the Vote (GOTV) to train diverse youth to mobilize their peers—and briefly features the ongoing work of some of Orange County's civic engagement groups. This report also points to opportunities to grow the electorate in Orange County for the 2020 election and beyond. As such, this research demonstrates the potential to strengthen democratic participation in one of California's most ethnically and politically diverse counties.

Who Are Orange County's Young Eligible Voters, Aged 18-34?

In 2018, young adult U.S. citizens aged 18-34 made up 31% of Orange County's eligible voters. The racial/ethnic composition of OC's young eligible voters has changed significantly over the last two decades, as this youthful population has grown more racially diverse, as shown in Figure 1. Young adult U.S. citizens of color now make up the majority (nearly two-thirds) of OC's young eligible voters: Latinx young adults, 40%; Asian-Pacific Islander young adults, 17%; Black young adults, 2%, and those who indicated "other non-White race" making up 4%. Meanwhile, Whites composed an estimated 37% of the young adult citizen population in 2018, reflecting a large decline in their share since 2000, when they made up 57% of eligible voters aged 18-34. Immigration, particularly from Mexico, Central America, China, Vietnam, Korea, the Philippines, and India, has contributed to the dramatic increase in the racial diversity of Orange County's young voters.

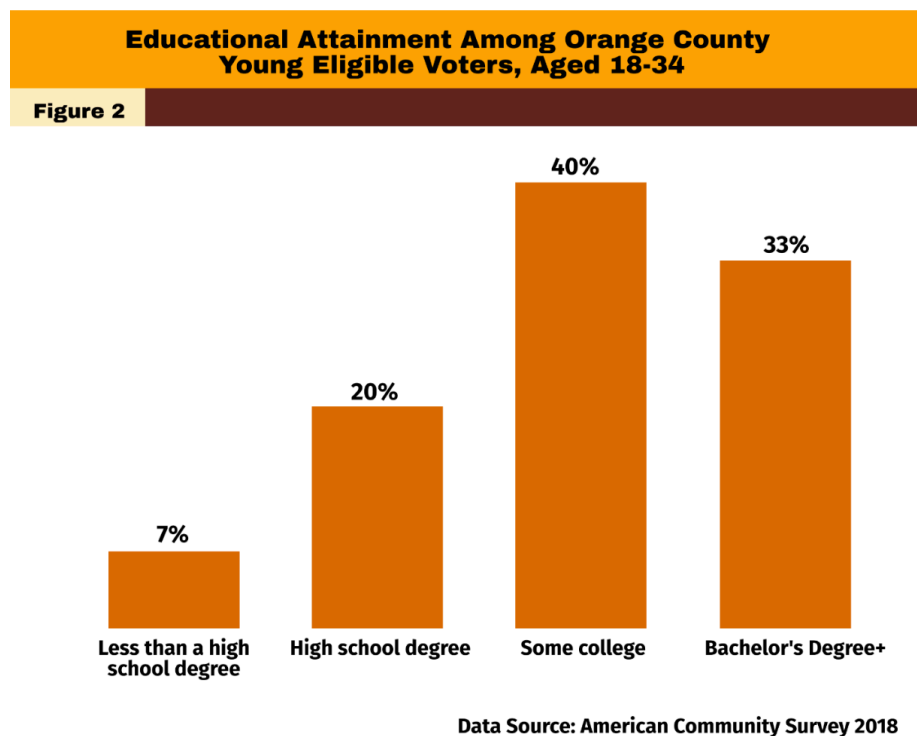
Racial Composition of Orange County Eligible Voters, Aged 18-34

Figure 1



Data Source: American Community Survey 2018

We also looked at the educational attainment of the young voting age population, given that college graduates tend to have greater access to information and networks that facilitate and motivate participation in the electoral process. Notably, young adults aged 18-34 in Orange County exhibit particularly high levels of education, with 33% possessing a bachelor's degree compared to 25% across the state. The largest share of young adults, however, have some college education (40%) without having earned a degree, while another 27% have a high school degree or less. Some of these young people are still in school, with 35% of 18-34-year-olds in the county enrolled in education programs. These groups with less educational attainment represent an opportunity for greater electoral engagement. Civic engagement groups, as well as others looking to grow the electorate, need to recognize that young people lacking bachelor's degrees, whether or not they are in school, typically remain undermobilized.

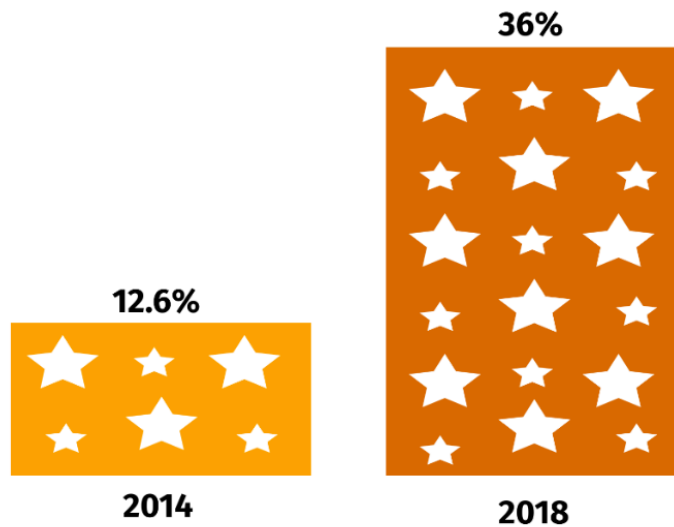


Increases in Turnout between 2014 and 2018 and the Role of Youth Organizing and Civic Engagement Groups

Turnout among young voters increased dramatically, nearly tripling between the 2014 and 2018 midterm elections, as shown in Figure 3.

Voter turnout among 18-34-year-olds nearly tripled between the 2014 and 2018 elections

Figure 3



Data Sources: California Civic Engagement Project and Political Data, Inc.

Why did voter turnout more than triple between 2014 and 2018? This increase in turnout can be attributed to several factors, including youths' concerns about the contentious national political climate, competitive congressional races throughout the county, and modest changes in population size. Youth organizing efforts focused on registering, educating, and mobilizing young voters also played a significant role in boosting turnout, and the role of these groups in empowering young leaders to get out the vote cannot be overstated.

During the 2018 election, youth organizing and civic engagement groups prepared adolescents and young adults to educate and mobilize their peers around the elections. Representing a youth-focused approach to what is sometimes referred to as Integrated Voter Engagement (IVE), these efforts entailed using age- and culturally-informed approaches to train young people to educate their peers about the voting process and the relevance of voting to their everyday lives. In doing so, these grassroots groups not only build local leadership but also strengthen ties between community organizations and their constituencies.

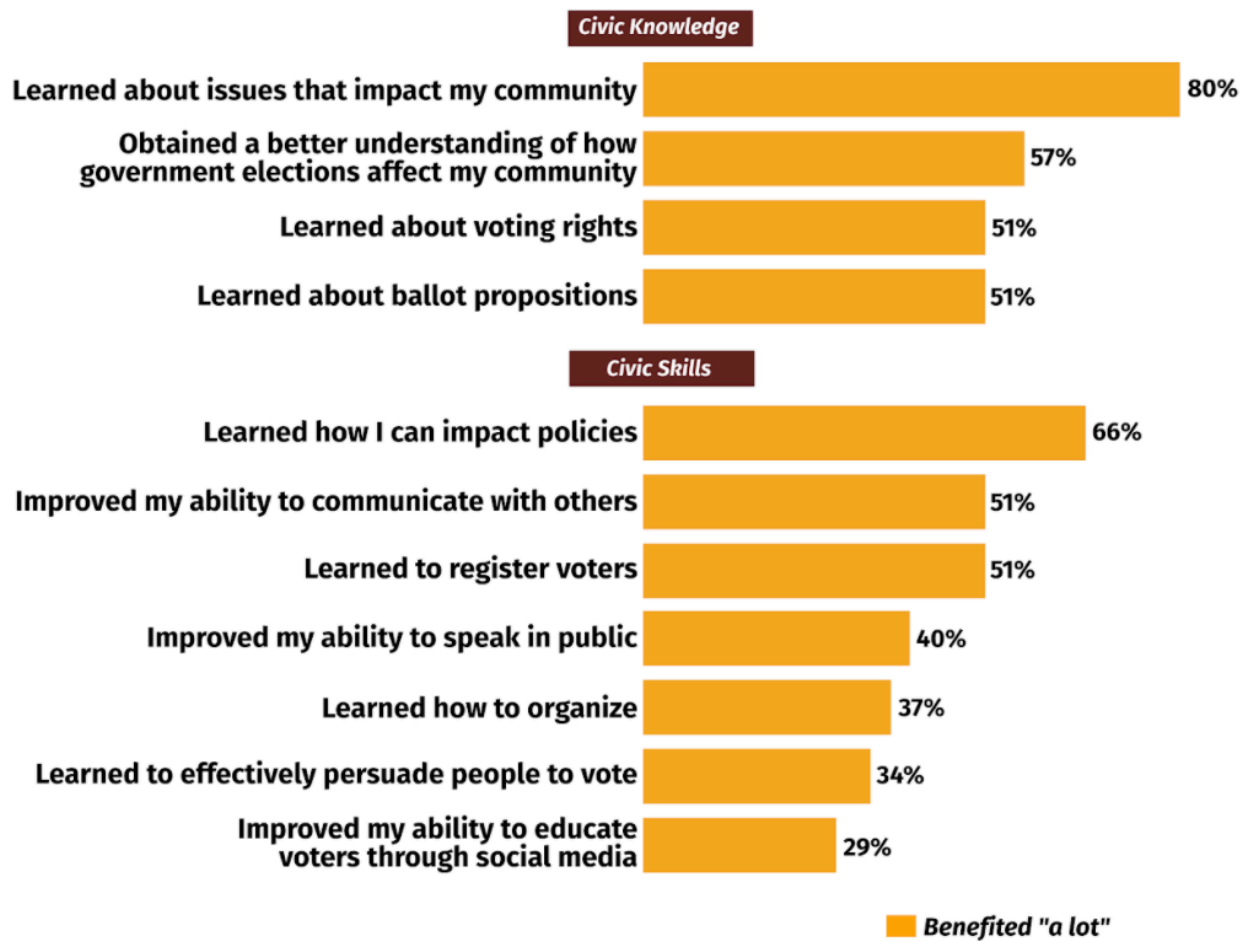
To this end, non-partisan groups meet their young members on a regular basis to walk them through how to register voters, conduct voter outreach presentations, and communicate with voters by phone, text messaging, and new technologies on social media platforms. Groups also debrief their members to evaluate the effectiveness of their outreach strategies and to make adjustments to improve their work. Typically, these groups train young leaders to be responsive to their peers' understandings of the political process and their own interests. As a result, members build a shared understanding of how to vote and why it matters.

This training has implications for developing young members' civic knowledge and skills, as evidenced by 2018 surveys we conducted with three youth organizing groups: Resilience OC, MPower, and the Korean Resource Center. At that time, these groups were part of the Power California Network, a statewide intermediary focused on increasing the representation of young voters of color in low-income communities. In the survey, we asked members to rate the degree to

which their group involvement impacted different aspects of their civic skills and knowledge—did it have “no impact,” “very little impact,” “some impact,” or “a lot of impact”? Figure 4 shows the percentage of respondents who reported that their involvement in their organization had “a lot” of impact on the development of their civic knowledge (e.g. community issues, voting rights, and ballot propositions) and civic skills (e.g. public speaking, youth organizing, persuading people to vote).

Youth organizing groups tend to provide members with a civic education not always accessible to young people, especially if they come from low-income or immigrant communities. Hence, it may not be surprising that 80% of those surveyed said they learned “a lot” about issues that impact their community. The majority also learned “a lot” about how government elections and ballot propositions affect their communities and about voting rights, valuable information that they could then share with their families and community members.

Civic Knowledge and Skills Acquired through Youth Organizing Groups
Figure 4 (N=35)



Data Source: Youth Leadership Survey 2018

Youth also developed their civic skills through organizational involvement. Members believed that they had increased their ability to impact social change: 66% learned “a lot” about how to impact policies affecting their communities or schools, and 37% learned “a lot” about how to organize others for campaigns. About half reported “a lot” of improvement in their ability to communicate with others, and 40% reported similar improvements in their public speaking. As organizations conducted voter outreach during the 2018 election, some members reported an increase in their capacity to mobilize their peers. About half learned “a lot” about how to properly register voters, while a smaller percentage (34%) expressed the same confidence about persuading people to vote. Finally, a minority (29%) felt that they had improved their ability to educate voters through social media by “a lot.”

Peer-to-Peer Outreach Efforts Increased Turnout Among Young Voters

Based on evidence from a 2018 experiment conducted with Power California-affiliated organizations, young people’s efforts to mobilize peers from their own communities can have a notable impact on voter turnout. From late September to Election Day on November 8, youth leaders from Resilience Orange County, the Korean Resource Center, and MPower spoke to voters aged 18-34 residing in Orange County. During phone calls, youth leaders reminded voters of the upcoming election, asked them about their plans to mail in their ballots or vote in person, clarified any questions about the process, and reminded those voting in person of their polling locations.

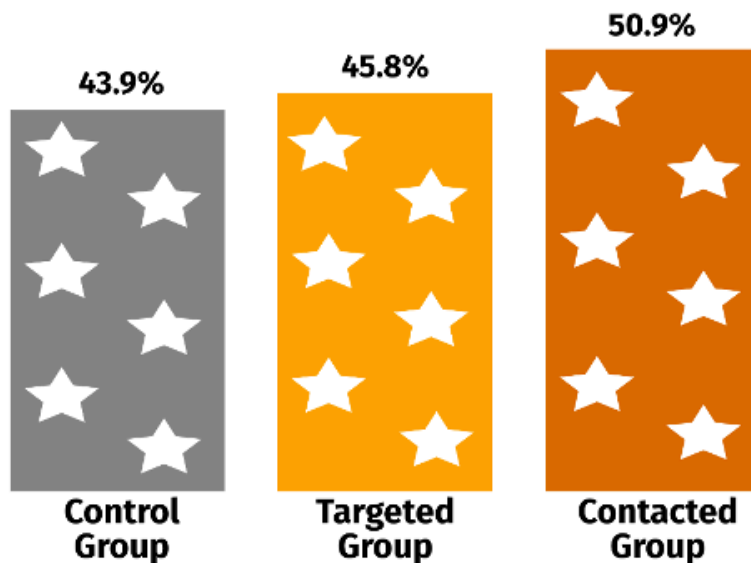
Our research demonstrates the extent to which peer-to-peer outreach efforts successfully increased turnout among young voters in Orange County. We compared predicted voter turnout between a randomly selected “control group” of voters aged 18-34 who were not targeted for outreach and those of the same age who received a voter outreach phone call. As shown in Figure 5, compared to the control group’s 43.9% predicted turnout, those who were targeted for outreach (regardless of whether they answered the phone) averaged a predicted turnout of 45.8%. Meanwhile, those who were successfully contacted by phone averaged a predicted turnout of 50.9%. This means that peer-initiated phone conversations resulted in an estimated 7 percentage points increase in turnout.¹ While these efforts had a clear impact during the 2018 election cycle, the goal among groups who share this IVE approach is broader: to engage their constituencies in between election cycles and in future elections, empowering them to become informed, high propensity voters over the long-term.

¹ These percentages are based on the results of OLS and Two-Stage Least Squares regression analyses that control for age, gender, race, prior voting history, Democratic Party registration, number of registered voters per household, voting method (poll vs. mail), and zip code characteristics.

Youth-led Phone Banking Efforts Increased Turnout Among 18-34-Year-Old Orange County Voters

Figure 5

(N=47,339)



Data Sources: Power California and Political Data, Inc.

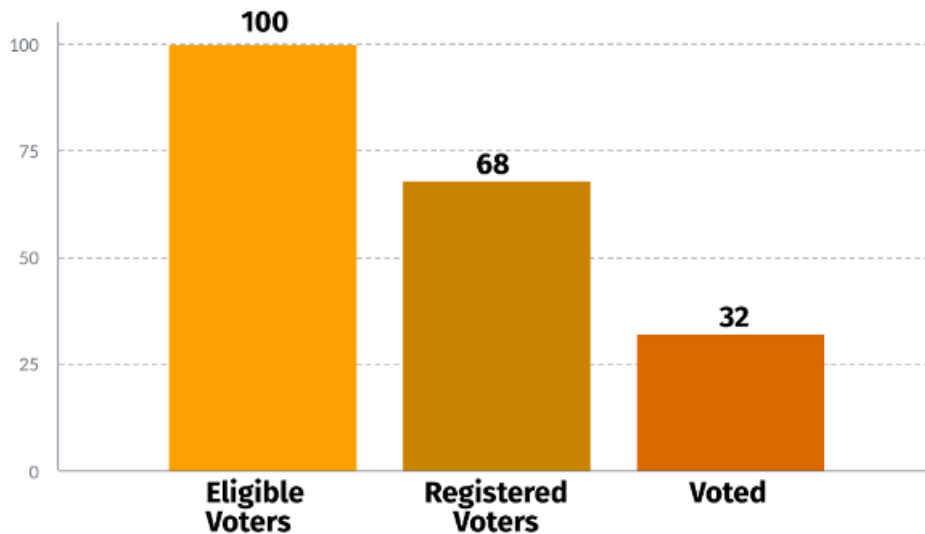
Opportunities for Growing the Electorate

Although turnout increased among young voters during the 2018 election, many young adults were not registered or mobilized. To demonstrate the potential for growing the electorate, we share the **Civic Engagement Gap Ratio** for Orange County, which shows the proportion of voters who registered and voted as a share of U.S. citizens in this age group. Specifically, this ratio shows that for every 100 eligible voters aged 18-34 in Orange County, 68 were registered while only 32 turned out to vote. In other words, about one-third of U.S. citizens in the county were not registered, and two-thirds did not exercise their right to vote.

The **Civic Engagement Gap Ratio** for Orange County suggests that much work remains to ensure that eligible young voters fill out and submit their voter registration forms. Additionally, this highly mobile population needs to be reminded to update their registration if they have changed residential addresses. Once registered, they will need reminders to vote via social media, phone calls, texts, and community events. Communication with young voters is essential, given that voting processes have changed and may continue to change as a result of the pandemic or other emergencies. We should also note that schools, community organizations, and religious institutions play an important role in reaching these young voters.

The Orange County Civic Engagement Gap Ratio, 2018 Voters Aged 18-34

Figure 6



Data Sources: American Community Survey 2018 and Political Data, Inc.

Conclusion

To achieve a more representative government in Orange County, active and consistent outreach to diverse young voters is necessary. As this report shows, eligible young voters in Orange County are racially diverse and come from various educational backgrounds; these demographic differences suggest diverse interests and concerns.

Community-based organizations that target and engage young voters during and between election cycles—sometimes called an Integrated Voter Engagement approach—offer one promising strategy for activating a young electorate during time-sensitive political battles and over the long-term. Leading up to the 2020 election, groups like Resilience OC, AHRI for Justice, Orange County Civic Engagement Table, and VietRise have been doing the important work of developing local leadership and preparing young people to conduct voter education and mobilization among a larger constituency of peers. This peer-to-peer outreach not only boosts short-term electoral participation but also contributes to a culture of voting and civic engagement within a community. Because voting is habit forming, convincing citizens to register and vote while they are young will result in a more active electorate over the long term.

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