

Civics education needs remedial work

By Mindy Romero Special to The Bee

The Golden State's voter turnout rates have declined steadily in midterm elections during the past few decades. But the most recent election placed an exclamation point on those trends. Only 30 percent of eligible Californians cast ballots in the 2014 general election, placing California in the bottom 20 percent of all U.S. states.

Worst of all was turnout among young people. The California Civic Engagement Project at the UC Davis Center for Regional Change found that in the November 2014 election, [only 8.2 percent of people 18 to 24](#) who were eligible to vote actually cast ballots.

That means that only 285,000 of the 3.5 million eligible young Californians voted, a shockingly low number. Although the final youth numbers by state aren't in, California may earn the dubious honor of having one of the lowest youth turnout rates in the nation. Since voting habits form at an early age, low turnout could become the new normal.

To turn this around, we need to do a much better job of introducing young people to the civic and electoral process. Voting is habit-forming. Young people who vote at age 18 are likely to keep voting as they get older. Engaging young voters means creating future generations of citizens who will show up at the ballot box, invigorating our democracy.

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The Washington [Post recently wrote about "the remarkable California turnout curve"](#) in the November election. The author wondered whether there might be something in the water because, he found, 18-year-olds in California voted more than their older peers – those age 19 through 25.

Some people may take this to mean that mobilizing 18-year-olds to vote won't necessarily help ensure they continue to vote as they age. But the Post did not make it clear that it was looking only at youths who already were registered to vote. Youths, particularly 18-year-olds, have very low registration rates.

At the California Civic Engagement Project, we looked at voter turnout data for all people eligible to vote – that is, citizens 18 and older – last November. It doesn't appear that the turnout for California's 18-year-olds was so remarkable after all.

Turnout for eligible 18-year-olds was actually the lowest of all ages: only 5.2 percent. Eligible turnout rates increased steadily as age increased. Only about 25,000 18-year-olds in California actually voted, the smallest number of any age. As in past elections, California in 2014 failed to mobilize its young people to vote when they turned 18.



Civics education is an investment in our state and nation's future. Young people who have had high-quality civics educational experiences are more likely to vote when eligible, form political opinions, understand campaign issues, and know basic facts about how our political system works.

High schools can be critical partners in educating students about our civic structures, and helping them become engaged participants in the electoral system. High schoolers who learn how voting can affect their lives, and how to actually register and vote, are more likely to cast ballots when they turn 18 than those who don't.

Civics education opportunities can include social studies classes, student elections, project-based learning, and classroom discussions of current events. Unfortunately, though, many young people are missing these formative experiences.

Research has shown that students in high schools in wealthier communities and with few youths of color are more likely to have these important opportunities. Youths who are less likely to vote, including kids from low-income families and youths of color, tend to have fewer civic opportunities.

There is an opportunity in California to expand our entire K-12 civics education. The state is undergoing sweeping reforms in its curriculum standards and school funding formulas. [Prioritizing civics education as part of these reforms](#) could help revitalize it.

Transforming civics education in California wouldn't just mean more youths voting. It would mean more voters, period. And it would help create a more representative voting electorate.

As it stands now, only a small percentage of youths are voting. As they age, only some of our young people will become regular voters. Those who do vote later will be more likely to be white, high-income and have college degrees. Older Californians of color or with lower incomes are terribly underrepresented in the state's electorate.

Higher turnout among California's youths means higher turnout among the entire electorate in years to come. Not taking action to support young voters threatens the function of our democracy.

Mindy Romero is director of the [California Civic Engagement Project](#) at the UC Davis Center for Regional Change. Her most recent piece for The Bee was headlined, "[Low voter turnout a good thing for some?](#)"