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# California's Voter Registration Rates

## Up but uneven

A review of California's most recent voter registration rates sends mixed messages.<sup>1</sup>

### The Good News: Current State Registration Rates Are Higher than in 2008

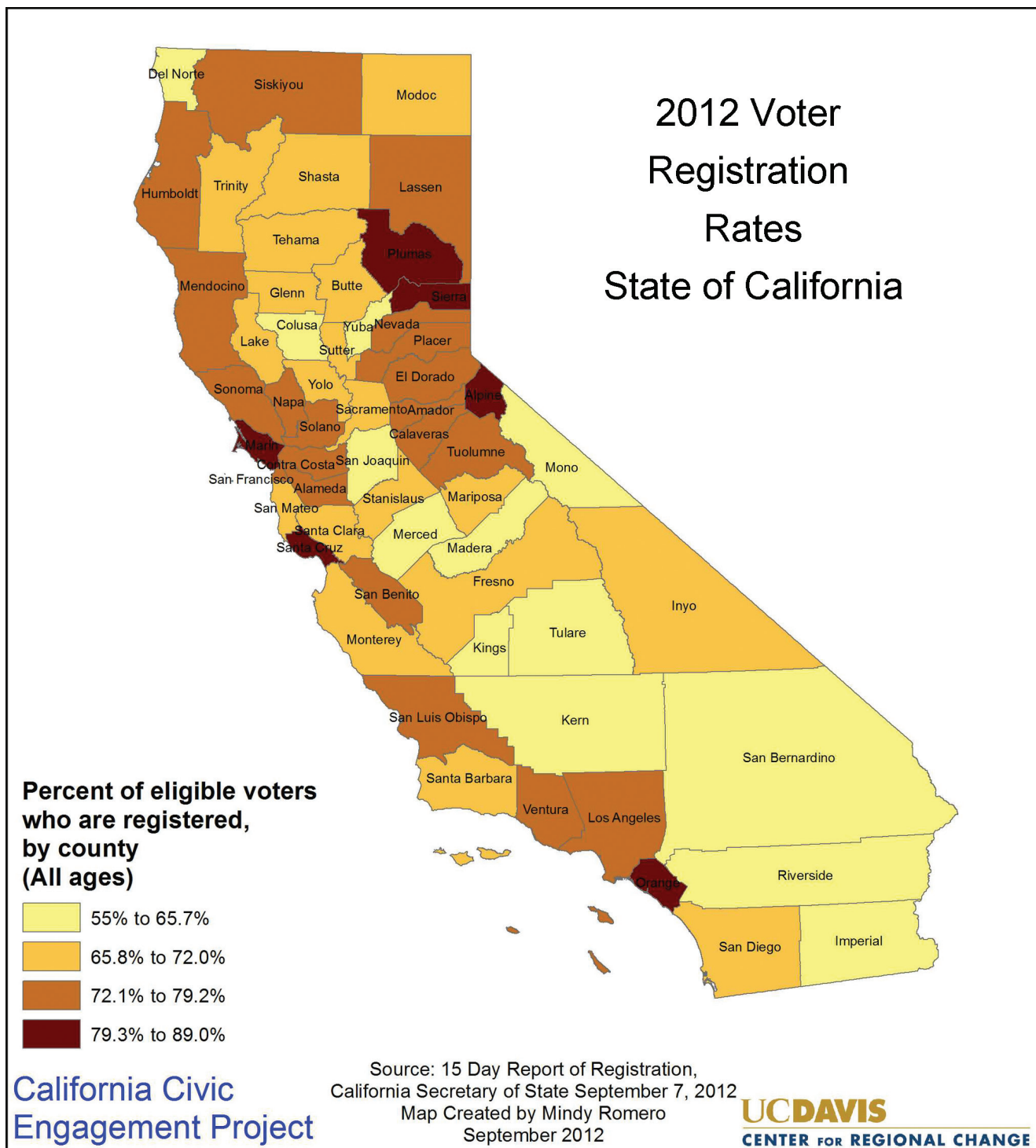
- Current state registration rates are at their highest levels since 1996.
- A comparison of September 2012 state registration figures with those of four years ago shows statewide registration rates have increased over two points, from 70 percent to 72.6 percent of eligible voters.<sup>2</sup>
- Campaigns matter. During campaign seasons, the combination of media attention and grassroots outreach can significantly increase registration rates. In 2008, registration rates rose 4.8 points to 74.6 percent between September and election day.

### The Bad News: Registration Rates Are Very Uneven Across the State's Counties

- California registration rates are among the lowest in the nation.<sup>3</sup>
- Fewer than three out of four California citizens are registered to vote.
- In many counties, especially in the Central Valley, only two out of three citizens are registered to vote. In a few coastal counties, the rate is closer to four out of five (see figure 1). For example, the voter registration rate in San Joaquin County is 65.2 percent, while the rate in Orange County is 83.8 percent.
- Figure 2 demonstrates that in nearly half of the state's counties, registration rates actually decreased, particularly in the southern Central Valley (Mariposa -5.5 percent, Tuolumne -4.5 percent, Madera -3.7 percent, and Tulare -2.4 percent).
- The map's striking geographic imbalance reflects the well-known relationship between voter registration rates and voter income. The state's wealthiest counties have the highest voter registration rates: Marin, Orange, Santa Cruz, and those situated in the Sierra Foothill/Tahoe area. The lowest registration rates are in

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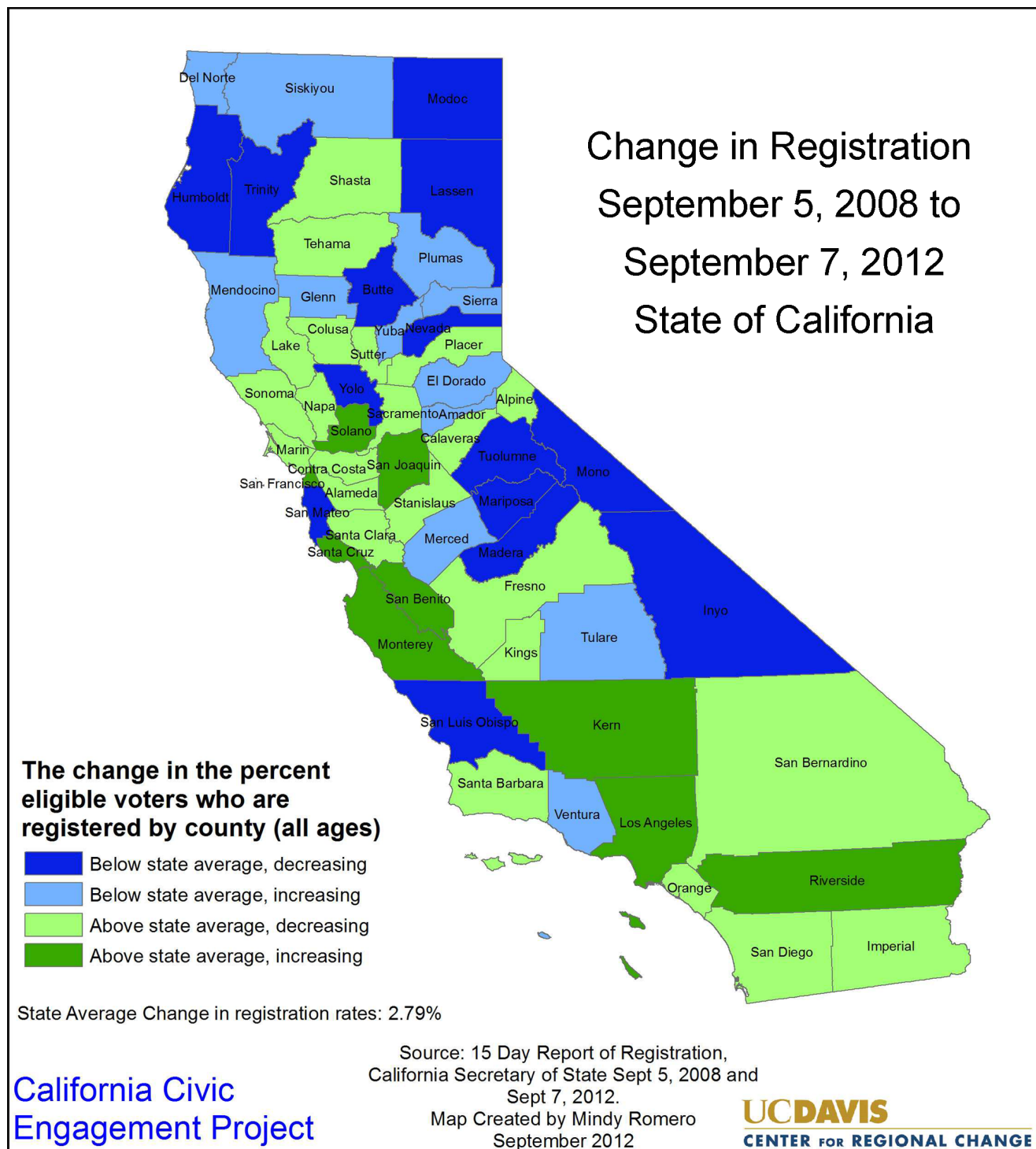
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Voter registration rates by county: September 2012 snapshot.

the counties with the highest poverty levels, including Fresno, Merced, Tulare, and San Bernardino. Ultimately, these disparities in registration leave wealthier and more educated populations with significantly more representation in the state's electorate.

**Update:** By the close of the final 2012 deadline, statewide voter registration rates reached 76.7% (up 2.1% over 2008). The new online registration system had been up and running for only a month before the October 22 deadline.

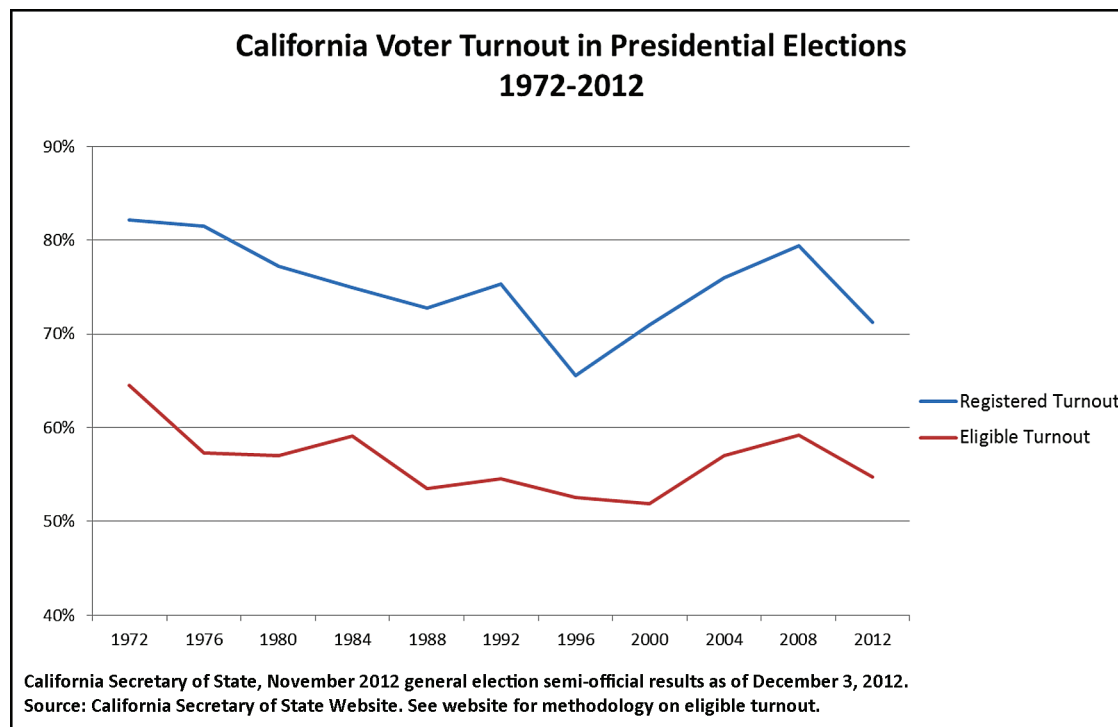


Voter registration trends, comparing 2008–2012: who's up, who's down?

### Solutions: How to Reduce Barriers to Registration

These uneven registration trends also reflect the capacity of county election authorities to actively register their citizens. Key questions remain with regard to the reach and extent of

voter registration outreach efforts, particularly in counties with declining rates. A recent blue-ribbon commission report, Roadmap for the Future of California Elections, suggests multiple actions are needed in order to achieve



a more informed and representative electorate *across* the state.<sup>4</sup> These recommendations include:

- *Establish same-day voter registration*
- *Automatic registration when citizens are eligible—evaluate available opportunities*
- *Youth registration—evaluate opportunities to implement “preregistration” at age 17*
- *Establish comprehensive civic education, with special emphasis on the importance of voting—to be utilized by schools and the media*
- *Seek additional public and private support for California voter outreach, education, and registration*
- *Provide the opportunity for newly naturalized citizens to submit their voter registration forms at naturalization ceremonies*

### California’s Registered Voter Turnout Trends—The Importance of Registration Rates

Voter turnout is understood in two different ways. The easiest to measure is turnout as a share of *already-registered*

voters. For understanding who is represented in our electorate, the more accurate indicator is voter turnout as a share of *eligible* voters. The following graph demonstrates the historical turnout trends for California’s electorate, seen through both of these lenses. Over the last forty years, registered turnout in the state has fluctuated significantly. State voter turnout rates have also varied significantly by county. A key contributor to these uneven turnout rates is the state’s ability to successfully register voters across its counties, ultimately impacting democratic representation. **B**

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Current California voter registration rates. 60 Day Report of Registration, September (2012), California Secretary of State.
- <sup>2</sup> Change in California voter registration rates from September 2008 to September 2012. 60 Day Report of Registration, September (2008, 2012), California Secretary of State.
- <sup>3</sup> “Roadmap for the Future of California Elections,” James Irvine Foundation (2012).
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.