



Latino Youth Civic Mobilization: Broadening the Electorate in Central California

Volunteers Increasing Civic Engagement (VICE)



CHICANO/LATINO RESEARCH CENTER
CROSS BORDER PERSPECTIVES LINKING THE AMERICAS

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About VICE

Volunteers Increasing Civic Engagement (VICE) is composed of 7 UCSC students who took on a project, during Summer 2012, to increase voter registration and voter turnout in Central California.

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Preface

During the spring of 2012, UC Santa Cruz students decided to take on a summer project that would aim to increase voter registration, voter turnout, and encourage informed decision-making amongst young adults in underserved communities in Stanislaus County, San Joaquin County, and Merced County. We all had different motivations for taking on the summer project but there was a general understanding that these communities were deeply underrepresented. We found it more than necessary to take action and begin a project of voter registration and voter information.

At the outset we did not know what to expect, as very few of us had direct experience with voter mobilization. Our first encounters were fortunate and we were excited at the registration of every new person that we persuaded to become a new voter. After days of canvassing and storefront approaches, it became clear to us that there were underlying issues that were relegated to another conversation because of the narrow scope of the strategies of the two voter registration campaigns we collaborated with. We were dealing with a population that has endured histories of alienation and political disenfranchisement. We encountered issues of immigration status, criminalization of youth of color, poverty, and racism that were not being addressed by the general voter registration efforts. Through our interactions we began to understand that a more comprehensive approach to voter inclusion was needed and that if campaigns were going to have any success, all of these issues had to be addressed as well.

It was also the first time that many of us had taken up this kind of project. The logistics of the project sometimes proved to be difficult because some of us were in Merced County, while the other half were living in neighboring Stanislaus County. The distance was an obstacle when trying to decide where to focus our efforts of voter registration and voter education. With no prior experience and with limited knowledge about such projects, we found ourselves running into dead ends and having to rethink our strategies. In one instance we were conflicted about where we could find young Latinos because public spaces for young people to gather were reduced to malls and spaces of consumption. The project proved to be a test of our ingenuity and efficiency in creating a targeted voter engagement project in California's Central Valley.

There was also a research component to the project that allowed us to have more insight into the conditions that many young Latinos face in this region. This was a great opportunity for us to conduct group interviews. At first we were confused as to where to turn to recruit potential participants because for most of our stay it had been difficult. We turned to established institutions such as the Merced County Office of Education, to find young Latinos who we could

interview. While searching for spaces, organizations or groups where we could converse with young Latinos, we discovered that very few places showed an interest in this constituency. We were witnessing the effects of diminishing city and county budgets that would otherwise provide spaces for young folks to become engaged in their communities. For instance, we attended a meeting in Merced with several community members, leaders, and city officials to discuss the re-opening of a pool in South Merced, which had been closed for the summer, following acts of violence and a shortfall in the operational budget. The fact that it was difficult to find the spaces where young Latinos congregated, was an indicator of deeper problems that were caused by economic and political decisions made at state, county, and city levels.

Our project not only aimed at targeting young Latinos, we also reached out to their extended networks, which included people who spoke languages other than English. From the beginning of our project, we interacted with predominantly Spanish-only speakers. This large audience required us to incorporate the Spanish language to convey our message on the importance of voting. As a result, the tactics we used to portray our message were both in English and Spanish. For example, although it was easier for us to create a set of cards with the California ballot propositions in English, out in the field we were quick to realize that a Spanish version was needed. We had to take into account that our targeted voters also included parents and community members, many of whom did not speak English. Language should not be a barrier to become an informed participant. We decided to have a Spanish version, because the extended network of our target audience are also a part of the voting process.

Acknowledgements: We were not alone in our efforts and we definitely could not have built this project without the help of key people and we would like to acknowledge them as well. We wish to thank Sebastian Barahona for also forming part of the team for the summer of 2012. We also wish to thank various people for their contributions to this project; Arnulfo De la Cruz, Angel Picón and Alejandro Carrillo of Mi Familia Vota for providing guidance and assistance in voter outreach; Tsia Xiong, Tong Vang and Jason Flores of the Merced Organizing Project. From UC Merced, we would like to thank Robin DeLugan and Stephanie Miller for connecting our efforts with the local community; Christopher Ramirez for providing crucial canvassing locations in Merced; Josh Franco for sharing knowledge in working with candidates. We also thank Pete and Viki La Torre of Patterson, for being amazing hosts to the team; Irene and Luis De La Cruz for providing alternative voter registration strategies; Jesse Ornelas from Merced College for bringing our efforts together, Mary Michael Rawling and Minerva Perez for inviting us to register voters at Golden Valley Health Centers; Erica Ayala for helping us reach young adults of voting age. We would also like to thank those who supported us along the way, which include mayors, organization leaders, county offices and churches. We also send a warm thank you to

Fe Moncloa for assisting us with focus group interview strategies and for guidance throughout the interview process. A special thanks to all our friends and family who showed their love and support throughout the project.

Finally, we would like to give a special thanks to Professor Jonathan Fox and incoming Professor Adrián Félix for their countless hours of mentorship and guidance in this project. We are thankful for the resources that were provided to make this a learning experience that will forever mark our professional careers. After months of voter registration, research, writing, and reading, we were lucky to have their support. Their sponsorship was always helpful in constructing such an ambitious project, in which we were given the freedom to research and analyze our participation during the summer. We walk away from this project knowing that opportunities like these are important for students to continue to witness the urgent needs that exist in many of our communities. As students we know that we have a responsibility to the many communities that we come from because if we hope to create a change it must start by informing ourselves and then taking action on the issues at hand. Another world is possible and we carry that hope with us as we, individually, carry on with our work and activism.



The VICE team with Dolores Huerta, founder of the National Farmworkers Association, which later became the United Farm Workers (UFW). The VICE team met with Dolores Huerta at the kickoff of the Mi Familia Voter Registration Campaign in early July, 2012.

Young Adult Under-Representation in California Politics

Jonathan Fox

Young adult citizens are systematically under-represented in the US political system, for reasons that are still not well understood. In California, only 66.6% of the state's 18-24-year-old eligible voters were even registered in the 2012 election – in contrast to a 76.7% registration rate for the state's electorate as a whole.

In the summer of 2012, a team of UC Santa Cruz students took on the challenge of promoting informed electoral participation among young adults in California's Central Valley, a region of extreme under-representation. This report shares the team's insights as participant-observers. But first, this introduction provides a brief sketch of the broader context.

One person, one vote?

The conventional wisdom says that our democracy is based on the principle of one person, one vote. But when voter turnout is low, then what is supposed to be a system for making political decisions based on majority rule... is not.

California's political system is unusual insofar as voters have the right to make laws through direct democracy -- the ballot initiative process. This system is rare not only in the US, but globally as well. Yet ballot initiatives rarely draw more than a slight majority of the electorate to the polls. After all, California is not a battleground state in presidential campaigns, plus, it is difficult to inform most voters effectively about what is at stake. The November 2012 official state voter guide was 144 pages long, so it looks a lot like homework.¹ Most voters find the long lists of very complex and arcane ballot initiatives to be quite daunting, not only those with less formal education. Plus, until recently, state ballot initiatives could be scheduled for *primary* elections, when turnout is always even lower than in general elections.²

Recall California's famous Prop 13 back in 1978, which both limited local property tax funding for schools and required a 2/3 legislative majority to pass state taxes and budgets. Press coverage and the history books recall that anti-tax victory as a "landslide." After all, Prop 13 did win 62.6% of the vote. But only 44.9% of the electorate actually voted – it was a June, primary

1 The California Voter Guide is available in ten languages. See: <http://vig.cdn.sos.ca.gov/2012/general/pdf/complete-vig-v2.pdf>

2 On the problems with California's political system, see Joe Mathews and Mark Paul, *California Crackup: How Reform Broke the Golden State and How We Can Fix It*, Berkeley: UC Press, 2010

election.³ This means that *only 28.1% of the electorate* made a law that gave one third of the legislature veto power over the majority of elected representatives. In effect, a minority of voters *locked in minority rule at the state level* for decades. As veteran California journalist Peter Schrag has pointed out, this was not just any minority of voters – Prop 13 landslide’s voting electorate was notably older, better-off, more likely to be homeowners, and whiter than California’s citizenry as a whole.⁴ They effectively pulled the plug on public education funding, with huge effects on the next generation.⁵

Who loses when voter turnout is low? The losers are citizens from groups whose rates of participation are historically and disproportionately lower than others – their voices and interests end up being “more underrepresented.” This can happen even when burning issues are on the ballot that directly affect specific groups – as in the case of Prop 30 in November 2012, which proposed to stabilize public education funding via a progressive income tax. One might have expected that young voters, whose families are directly affected by school quality issues, as well as by rising tuition at public institutions of higher education, might have turned out to vote at much higher than usual rates. Plus, keep in mind that when we think about young adult voters in California, a huge share are Latino. As of the last census, *48% of 18-year-olds* in California were Latinos. But in November of 2012, *not even one third of eligible voters between 18 and 24 actually voted*, in contrast to a 55% general turnout rate among eligible voters.⁶

Because voter turnout rates are so closely correlated with inequalities in formal education, age and income, this dramatic imbalance between the citizenry and who actually votes leads to clear patterns of underrepresentation.⁷ There are racial differences in turnout rates, but since race correlates with formal education and income and age, it is not easy to disentangle cause from correlation. Plus, African-Americans turn out to vote at rates higher than their income and education levels would “predict,” which is more evidence that turnout rates are not somehow fixed or predetermined, but rather that politics and culture matter as well.⁸

3 Now ballot initiatives are limited to general elections.

4 See his classic *Paradise Lost: California’s Experience, America’s Future*, New York: New Press, 1998.

5 See the 2004 Merrow Report PBS documentary, “From First to Worst” @ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5NhiM9ApCw>

6 See note 1 and Mindy Romero, “California’s 2012 Youth Voter Turnout: Disparate Growth and Remaining Challenges,” *CCEP Policy Brief*, No. 5, March 2013 (California Civic Engagement Project, Center for Regional Change, UC Davis). Note that media reports often refer to turnout rates as a percentage of registered voters, and since more than a quarter of California’s electorate is not registered, this indicator of voter participation is so inaccurate as to be deceptive. But it is easier to *measure* turnout as a share of registered voters than as a share of eligible voters.

7 For a classic overview, see Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba and Henry E. Brady, *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. For an overview of youth voting, see Mark Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People?* (3rd edition), New York, Pearson Longman, 2011

8 For further discussion of these issues, see Lisa García Bedolla, *Fluid Borders: Latino Power, Identity, and Politics in Los Angeles*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

To get the full picture, it is revealing to look at the geographic imbalance in turnout rates as well. Within California, for example, Latino voter turnout rates – as a share of registered voters – vary widely by county. Map 1 shows this pattern for the 2008 presidential election, with the darker counties indicating higher turnout rates. Keep in mind that this way of presenting voter turnout is very limited, since so many voters are not registered. If one is interested in the core democratic principle of one person, one vote, the best indicator of turnout is as a share of *eligible* voters – but that is much harder to figure out.⁹ Map 2 shows the uneven patterns of voter registration across the state, ranging from the light counties, with well under 70% of the electorate, to the darkest counties with over 80%.

In California, most voters are concentrated in huge metro areas like Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area. These regions have some degree of “civic infrastructure” – the grass-roots organizations, nonprofits, local governments, unions and media that have some capacity to promote informed participation, even among those who often feel excluded. Meanwhile, other regions of the state lack this relative “civic density” – most notably the Central Valley, the Salinas Valley, the Inland Empire and the most extreme case of exclusion, Imperial County. County level poverty rates and high school dropout rates also vary along similar lines. It’s hard to figure out which is the chicken and which is the egg – are the majority of the citizens in these regions politically under-represented because they are so low income and are “thin” in civic terms? Or does the arrow go the other way? Is there so much poverty and civic thin-ness because so many citizens there are politically under-represented? Both are going on at the same time, which suggests a vicious circle.

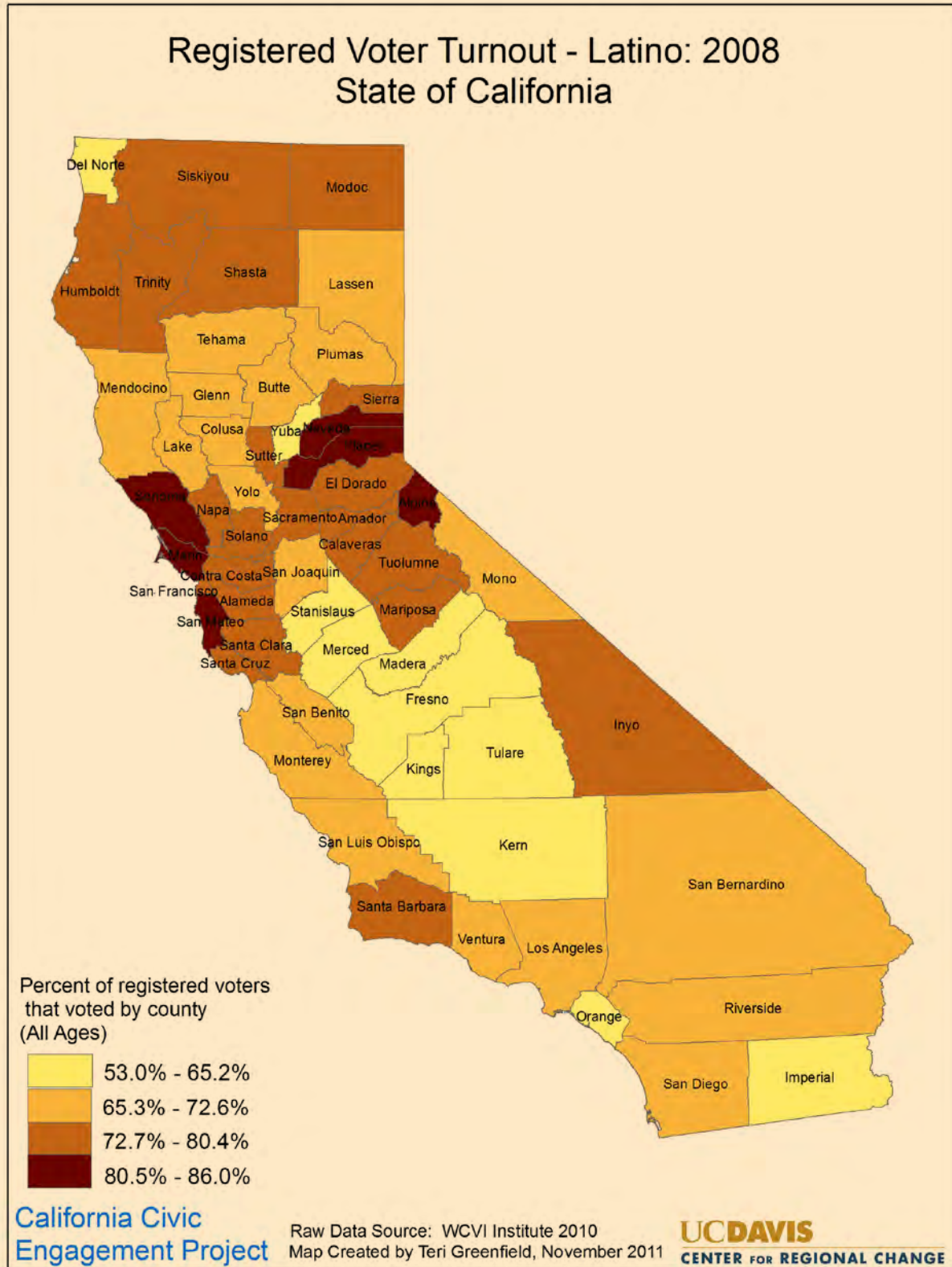
The upshot is that voter turnout rates as a share of the electorate vary *really* widely across counties, as Map 3 shows. The gap between high and low turnout counties reaches a full 36% spread - with less than half of the electorate voting in the lighter counties, while more than two thirds of the electorate vote in the darker counties. When one maps turnout rates for 18-24-year-olds, the picture looks even more extreme, as shown in Map 4. Young adult voting rates vary geographically even more than for the general population, by 40% across counties. But all at much lower rates - 23% below the general population. Put another way, in 2012, almost half of California’s eligible voters did not vote (44.5%) – but more than two-thirds (68%) of the eligible 18-24 citizens did not exercise their right to vote.¹⁰

⁹ Because of the methodological challenges involved in measuring specifically Latino voter turnout as a share of eligible voters with precision, especially at the subnational level, fine-tuned results from the November 2012 election are not yet available. Even the best national surveys of Latino turnout in 2012 end up with fuzzy estimates – as in the “estimated 44% to 53% turnout rate of eligible Hispanic voters in 2012,” Pew Hispanic Center, “An Awakened Giant: The Hispanic Electorate Is Likely to Double by 2030,” Nov. 14, 2012, page 6

¹⁰ See Romero and Fox, op cit.

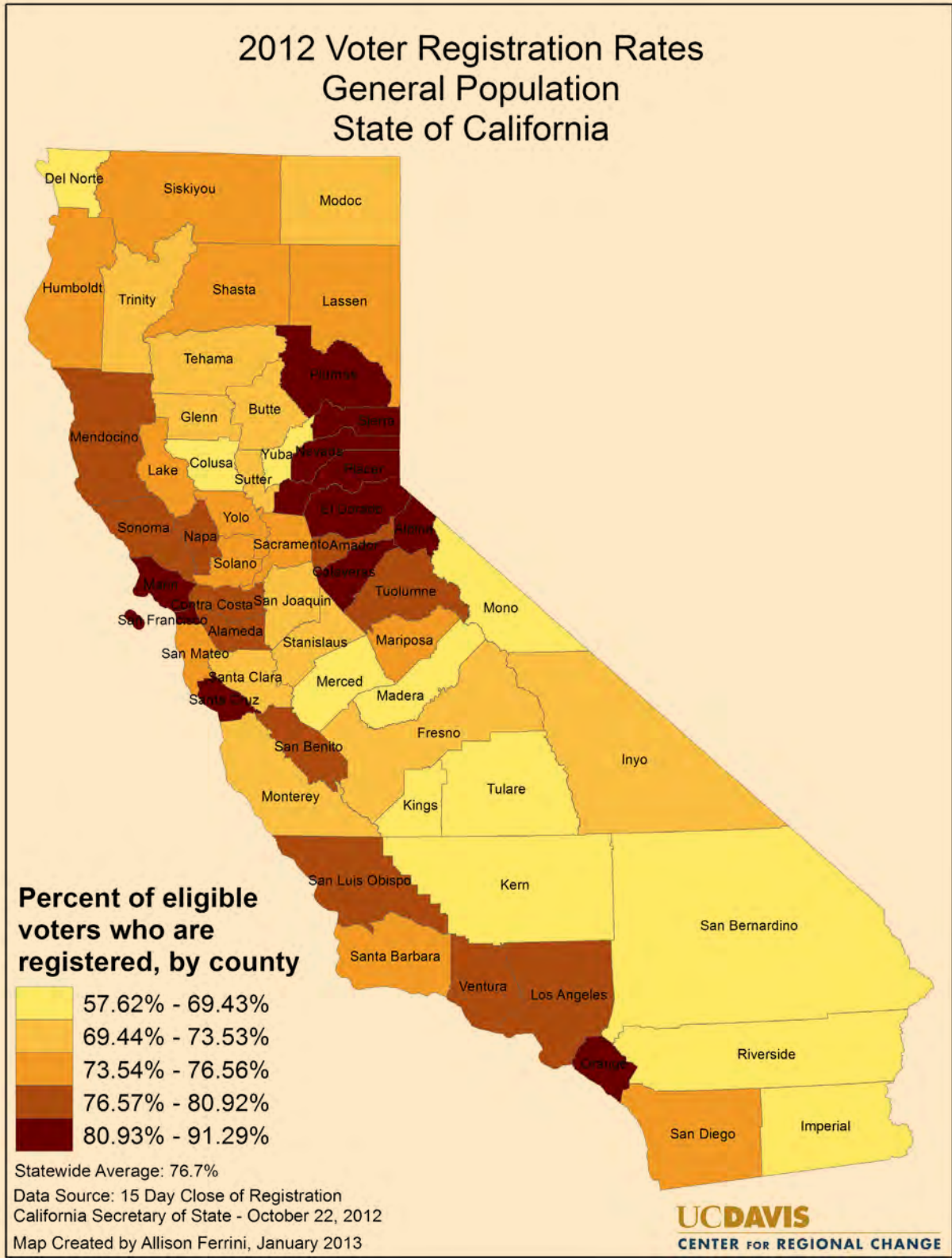
Map 1: Latino Turnout Rates in California, as share of registered voters, 2008

Source: California Civic Engagement Project, Center for Regional Change, UC Davis



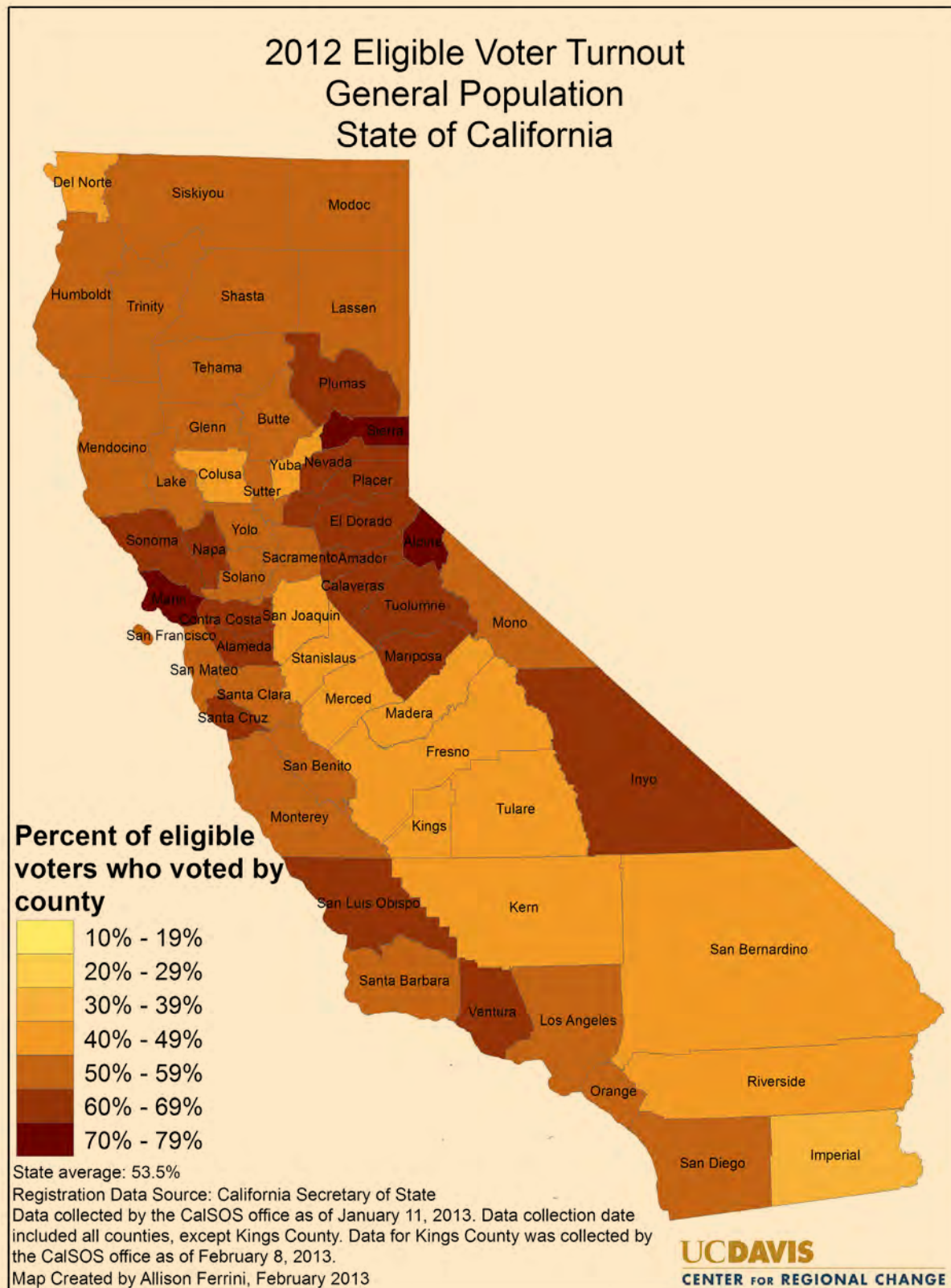
Map 2: California Voter Registration Rates, by County, 2012

Source: California Civic Engagement Project, Center for Regional Change, UC Davis



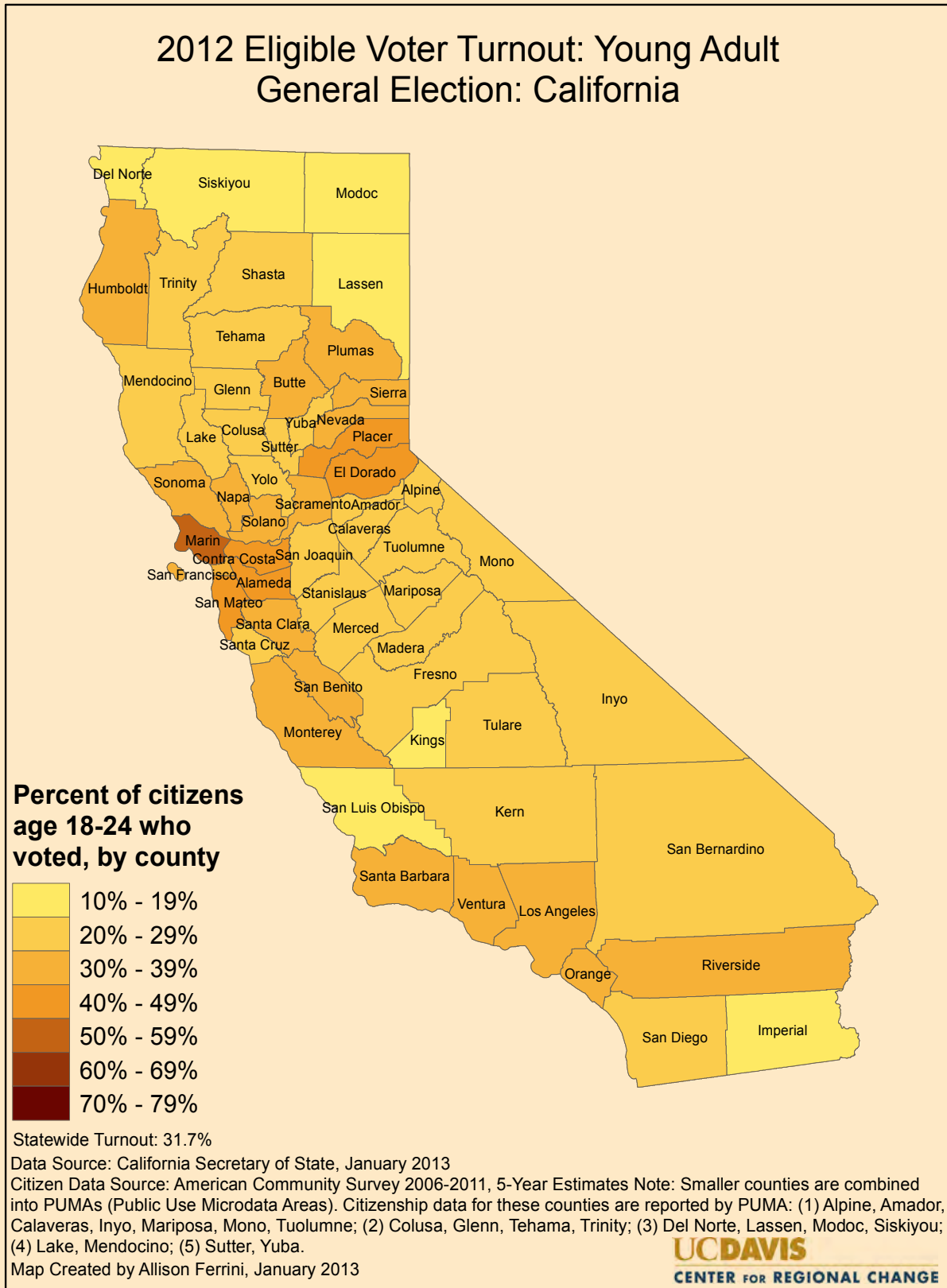
Map 3: Turnout Rates for Eligible Voters, by County, 2012

Source: California Civic Engagement Project, Center for Regional Change, UC Davis



Map 4: 2012 Turnout of eligible 18-24 voters

Source: California Civic Engagement Project, Center for Regional Change, UC Davis



For many youth organizers and youth-oriented civic organizations, this is not news. Civic organizations have pursued useful initiatives in their efforts to promote youth voting for many years.¹¹ Yet when election time comes around, political parties and allied civic organizations tend to focus primarily on “likely voters” – usually defined as those who have voted regularly in the past. These organizations have lots of reasons to want to invest their scarce resources where they will get more bang for the buck. At the same time, volunteer-based civic education organizations, committed to promoting informed participation and broadening the electorate, tend to have a thin base precisely in those regions that need it the most. This sharply uneven “civic density” is especially pronounced for some of the most effective political mobilization organizations in California: trade unions. Plus, even those organizations that are most committed and effective at civic education do not necessarily target young adults – who are often considered “low propensity voters” because of their low registration and turnout rates. This suggests a vicious circle of social exclusion > alienation/apathy > political under-representation > political exclusion. By definition, vicious circles are self-perpetuating -- in the absence of a sustained, strategic intervention.

Yet a new wave of applied research shows that “low-propensity voters” can indeed be successfully encouraged to vote. Political scientists Lisa García Bedolla and Melissa Michelson have synthesized the lessons and drawn new theoretical conclusions.¹² They partnered with community-based organizations in under-represented communities throughout the state to carry out more than 200 field experiments, trying out different outreach methods. Their findings stress the importance of aligning both the messenger and the message. They show that the simple act of person-to-person contact, even with people who vote rarely, can successfully encourage them to exercise their rights at the ballot box. It’s about respect. Somebody *cares* about what they think about how the system should work. Folks notice.¹³

These practical research findings informed the design of the summer 2012 UCSC voter education project, which intended to promote informed youth participation in the November

11 See, for example, the work of Rock the Vote, the League of Young Voters and the League of Women Voters “High School Voter Registration Training Manual,” <http://www.lwv.org/content/high-school-voter-registration-training-manual-2nd-edition> See also <http://www.generationcitizen.org/what-we-do>, http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/Young_Voters_Guide.pdf, and

<http://www.centerforactioncivics.org/elections-in-action-lessons/>

12 See their *Mobilizing Inclusion: Transforming the Electorate through Get-Out-the-Vote Campaigns*, Yale University Press, 2012.

13 For earlier work, see, for example, Melissa Michelson, “Mobilizing the Latino Youth Vote: Some Experimental Results,” *Social Science Quarterly*, 87(5), Dec. 2006, Melissa Michelson, “Meeting the Challenge of Latino Voter Mobilization,” *Annals AAPSS*, 601, Sept., 2005, Ricardo Ramirez, “Giving Voice to Latino Voters: A Field Experiment on the Effectiveness of a National Nonpartisan Mobilization Effort,” *Annals AAPSS*, 601, Sept., 2005, Donald Green and Alan Gerber, *Getting Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2008, 2nd. Ed, as well as applied research reports at: <http://www.irvine.org/publications/publications-by-topic/californiademocracy>.

2012 California elections. The initiatives on that November ballot were expected to be especially numerous and complex, which could be discouraging to many first-time voters. The idea was for student outreach teams to develop youth-to-youth “messages,” and to hone their leadership and communication skills in the process. The voter education team faced the challenge of taking on the “why bother to vote?” question by focusing on the upcoming state ballot initiative that was going to address the state’s crisis in public education. The team would partner with community-based organizations in regions with low levels of Latino youth voter participation. They would focus on educational outreach to explain the often-confusing ballot initiative process, in order to help young citizens to become informed participants in the initiative process.

The summer project was a pilot exploration of how culturally versatile college students immersed in the study of Latino community issues could be especially effective communicators, in an effort to break the vicious circle of exclusion-alienation-underrepresentation. The hope was that students’ creative energy and commitment to public education would have the potential to increase youth voter turnout by inventing messages and outreach campaigns that could motivate their less engaged counterparts. Their experience in this process would contribute to developing their professional skills in organization, teamwork, communications and leadership. In addition, this pilot initiative was intended to generate practical lessons to inform potentially replicable models for larger-scale future projects intended to promote civic engagement of Latino youth.

The faculty sponsors – yours truly, together with new, incoming LALS professor Adrián Félix, developed training materials and explored potential partner organizations in the Central Valley. We reached out to two civic organizations in neighboring counties: Mi Familia Vota – a national voter outreach/campaigning organization with a presence in Stanislaus County, and the Merced Organizing Project, a congregation-based community organization based in Merced County and affiliated with the PICO network.¹⁴ From a student-learning point of view, the idea was to partner with two organizations so that they could learn two very different organizing and outreach styles, which come through in the student essays that follow. In addition, as a practical matter, we wanted two non-overlapping partner organizations just in case one did not work out.

Our goal was for the students both to organize themselves as a team – and to be treated as a team by their local counterparts. Past action-research involving different approaches to youth organizing shows that *youth-led* organizing can make a big difference, and requires a very mindful approach on the part of adult allies.¹⁵ This partnership approach is different from

¹⁴ On their national networks, see <http://www.mifamiliavota.us/mifamiliavota/> and <http://www.piconetwork.org/>

¹⁵ See Melvin Delgado and Lee Staples, *Youth-Led Community Organizing: Theory and Action*, Oxford University Press, 2008

conventional “plug-in” internships, where adult-led host organizations incorporate volunteers by just telling them what to do. In this case, the UCSC faculty worked with the partner organizations and the students to develop terms of reference that were very explicit about the partnership idea, which implied a degree of autonomy for the students. This turned out to be very important, both for leadership development and to help the students to create the space to hone in on young adults – especially since their partner organizations did not share this specific focus. The team-based approach was also intended to generate esprit-de-corps among the students -- who mostly did not know each other already -- to help them to socialize their learning experiences, and to provide mutual support and accountability. They called themselves VICE – Volunteers Increasing Civic Engagement, and you can find them on Facebook.

The rest of this report is dedicated to the students’ own reflections on their experiences. They spent the fall of 2012 and the winter of 2013 developing their ideas and crafting their prose, both individually and collectively – with intellectual and editorial support from the faculty sponsors. The production of this report was also a student-faculty partnership, with the team members developing the outline, commenting on each other’s work, selecting photos and developing the title.

In the essays that follow, each author addresses a different, complementary dimension of their lessons learned. Their essays weave together analytical and ethnographic observations, and the resulting whole is even greater than the sum of the parts. Mariah Melena identifies how the two partner organizations deployed different outreach logics, posing challenges for the student team to strike the right balance – especially when faced with “adultist” attitudes. Diana De Jesus discusses the team’s effort to develop outreach messages that would resonate, as well as the politics of place -- the difference between trying to reach people at their door vs. engaging with them in public places, like farmers’ markets. America Valdes adds another dimension to the analysis of messaging, by focusing on the role of social media – it turned out to be crucial for networking with other organizers, but did not unlock doors into preexisting community-based networks. Eddie Sanchez documents his experience with the racial micro-politics of door-to-door canvassing, and the ways in which subtle and not-so-subtle cues influenced how members of the voter education team were received. David Padilla-Ramos sheds light on the experience of ex-felons who feel disenfranchised. Even though they can register to vote in California, many do not realize it, and no public or civic organization in the region addressed this need for more awareness. Mireya Mateo draws on her experience canvassing in farmworker neighborhoods, finding that they are ignored by most voter outreach efforts, which assume that no potential voters live there – yet even if many farmworkers are not US citizens, many, if not most of their adult children are. Lucero Aguiñiga builds on this broader approach by exploring how voter

registration efforts can engage with mixed immigration status families – since those without the right to vote can encourage other family members to get involved.

One of the main cross-cutting themes that emerges in these essays is the challenge of how to address the tradeoffs between short-term and long-term approaches to encouraging informed voter participation. In the VICE team’s experience, to really get the attention of someone who feels totally excluded -- to address their “why bother” question -- takes more than just a quick pitch and a clipboard.¹⁶ Yet every long conversation takes the place of short conversations with many more people. The team’s essays also stress the importance of developing outreach strategies that reach entire families, especially mixed-status families, in order to motivate voting for the many who *are* eligible by encouraging a greater sense of inclusion and respect for their voices. Otherwise, those low participation counties on the maps will remain light for the indefinite future, trapped in vicious circles of exclusion, disengagement and underrepresentation.

From here on in this report, the team members will speak for themselves... hopefully different constituencies will benefit from their lessons learned – especially other young adult organizers, but also teachers, organizers, funders, and other allies.

Acknowledgements: Thanks very much to the Werner-Kohnstamm Family Fund, Janet McKinley and Steve Silberstein for their generous and timely donations to our LALS fund for student scholarships, which made possible the team’s intensive full-time participation in this project during the summer of 2012. Thanks to Prof. Robin DeLugan of UC Merced for facilitating contacts. Thanks to Fe Moncloa for insights into youth-led organizing, for contributions to the training process, and for comments on an earlier version of this essay. Thanks also to Tania Cruz Salazar for many conversations about youth studies. Thanks especially to Adrián Félix for his consistent and insightful support throughout the project, including feedback on an earlier version of this essay. David Padilla-Ramos and Miguel Zavala handled the report’s design and layout. Thanks very much to Mindy Romero of the UC Davis Center for Regional Change, for permission to reprint the maps. Above all, congratulations to the UCSC student summer voter education team for their commitment and insight.

¹⁶ Note that this assessment by VICE team members contrasts with García Bedolla and Michelson’s interpretations of their experimental field research findings, which is that a short, scripted canvassing conversation is often sufficient to trigger a change in the target’s cognitive schema (how they see the electoral process). One explanation for this difference may be that García Bedolla and Michelson’s research focused on “get-out-the-vote” efforts to engage *already-registered* “low-propensity” voters, while the VICE team sought to reach the unregistered. Presumably even infrequent voters are at least somewhat more electorally engaged than the unregistered.

Balancing Partnerships

Mariah Melena

Partnering with two different organizations was not only intended to make our team's integration into the dynamics of the Central Valley easier, but also to expose our group to two different organizing styles. However, as we were quick to find out, splitting our time between two organizations, each with different styles for achieving their goals, proved to be difficult. Mi Familia Vota (MFV) was active in their partnership with us, while the Merced Organizing Project (MOP) was more hands-off in our interactions. This unforeseen dynamic made it more difficult for VICE to choose the right organizing techniques for ourselves.

Though both MFV and MOP had similar goals, registering 3,000 low propensity voters, they had different tactics. However, despite their different organizing styles, both organizations preferred to register people to vote-by-mail. The reason for this, we were told, was because it allowed voters time to look over the propositions and candidates on the ballot, in the hopes that they would make a more informed decision. MFV preferred to implement a door-to-door canvassing campaign to register voters in Stanislaus county and San Joaquin county. MOP had a different approach in neighboring Merced county, focused on tabling local events, whether it was the farmers' market, church services, or neighborhood barbeques.



Team members (From left to right) Eddie Sanchez, America Valdes, and Mariah Melena at the Mi Familia Vota San Joaquin County voter registration kickoff.

The different strategies implemented by these organizations helped to explain their interactions with our team. However, their basic structure was also an explanation for our interactions. MFV is more hierarchical, decisions were not being made by local members; they were only implementing the tactics handed down by the state office. MOP's decision-making style is more horizontal in nature, which allows them to be more flexible. MFV was more campaign-oriented and MOP was grounded in local institutions, like congregations, and daily life. MFV was running a campaign driven by short-term goals, which explains why they were stricter in the way they operated, whereas MOP's long-term campaign explains the reasoning behind their tactics. Additionally, the strategies that were implemented by both organizations partly stem from the fact that they are organizations that are centered on different issues. MFV defines itself as a "non-profit working to unite the Latino community...to promote social and economic justice through increased civic participation." They focus primarily on voter mobilization, which explains why they were inflexible towards our suggestions, which included youth outreach and mobilization. They already had techniques ingrained in their organization that worked for them. Due to the fact that MFV was mainly financed by unions, they were highly influenced by SEIU, making it a progressive but, at times, a top-down organization. On the other hand, MOP is a "faith-based organization working to address problems and concerns of their communities to



Community organizers and team member Eddie Sanchez during a Merced Organizing Project meeting.

strengthen the life of congregations.” Since MOP was a general community organization it was logical that they would be more flexible because of the multi-issue focus.

The logic behind partnering with two different organizations was that we would have the experience of learning diverse approaches; this became a difficult task when we partnered with two organizations where there was tension between us and the host group a very adultist and rigid way of running their campaign. Their style of organizing was so regimented that they did not take our input seriously, about how to make canvassing more productive. For example, we suggested that canvassing at a later time in the evening because many people do not get home until after 5:00 pm, but they were quick to brush it off. This became a difficult situation because, while we respected their techniques and years of community organizing, this type of environment did not allow us to accomplish the goals which we had set for ourselves at the beginning of this project, which prioritized reaching young adults in particular, as well as public education to encourage informed voter decisions on the November ballot propositions. For example, when our group wanted to organize a forum to help the community decipher the propositions on the November ballot, we were told that this moment would not be the best time because the election was still several months away and people would not be interested or remember what we said by the time they had to cast their votes.

Our partnership with MOP was very different from our relationship with MFV. Instead of telling us exactly what to do and where to go, MOP expected us to find our own events to table, along with finding our own techniques for registering voters. MOP had a laissez-faire, nonchalant attitude towards their partnership with us. What they were focused more on doing was phone banking, with the telephone numbers we collected from people we registered. Whereas MOP might have been more disorganized in running their voter registration drive, which was partly due to the fact that they lost their voter registration liaison, this relaxed atmosphere allowed our group to pursue creative and innovative ideas that we brought from our different backgrounds. For example, one of our team members created a voter registration pledge, which was initiated after we canvassed neighborhoods in South Merced and encountered many residents who were ineligible to vote. The basis of the pledge was to ask individuals to register family members, friends, or co-workers in lieu of themselves. These rigid organizational environments were what we had to learn to navigate through in order to accomplish our goals.

Our interactions with both host organizations taught us to negotiate, as well as to be professional and resourceful. Once we learned to negotiate properly with both of the partner organizations, we were able to productively split our time between them. What led to this negotiating capacity was a meeting we had with MFV, after the kick-off of the “Todos A Votar” campaign. The launch of the event took place at a community center, La Jamaica, in Stockton.

The event's purpose was to excite people to join and start voter registration drives in their communities. The rhetoric of that morning, that Latinos can make the difference in this upcoming election, that our vote is our voice, rang through the speeches given by the morning's speakers. Guests included various members from the area's SEIU local, faith-based organizations, and the keynote speaker of the morning, Eliseo Medina, treasurer of MFV, national leader of SEIU, and well-known activist. After the speeches, the core members of MFV led a few volunteers and reporters on a media based block walk, which was a regular block walk but with the media documenting our encounters, to raise morale and motivate people to do more for their communities.¹

At the end of this event, we met with MFV to discuss our goals for the project and to express discontent with how our team was being treated. However, when we met with them we were thrown off because we had not yet planned what we wanted to discuss—the meeting had been moved forward by an hour, so we did not have time to properly prepare. We had originally wanted to discuss how we thought we should split our time between both organizations, though we would soon find out that not everyone in our group had the same idea. While some thought we should devote at least two days to helping MFV canvass, others thought we should devote less time. It was soon after the start of the meeting that we decided we needed to go into a separate room to reach a consensus before we started negotiating with MFV. After roughly twenty minutes of deliberating about how much time we should devote to MFV, we came to an agreement that those of us living in Patterson would help canvass at least two days of the week, while those in Merced would canvass with MFV one day a week. We decided that one person would relay our decision, on behalf of us, to MFV, as to not have people interpreting each other. Though at first they were not satisfied with our decision, after we told them that we were not budging they were happy to take that instead of nothing.

This incident taught us how important it was for us to be in agreement with each other so that we could be taken more seriously as a group. What happened with both organizations was that they did not see us as an autonomous team, but as a group of students who came to help their organization. Many adult-led organizations limit the participation of youth because they do not know how to incorporate them into their organizations in ways that respect their initiative and autonomy. In order to have a compatible relationship, “adults must be able to step back and trust that youth can be responsible, yet not tune out because they are in a position to provide support,”² this is something that both groups had difficulty accomplishing.

1 <http://univisionsacramento.univision.com/videos/video/2012-07-27/todos-a-votar-motivan-a>

2 Melvin Delgado and Lee Staples, *Youth-Led Community Organizing: Theory and Action*, Oxford University Press, 2008, 32.

Establishing a balanced partnership between both organizations and declaring ourselves an autonomous group was at first a difficult task to complete, however, halfway through the project we were able to establish our independence. The need to create a balanced partnership was essential to the achievement of our goals. Without being accepted as an autonomous group we were hindered in our ability to actively implement tactics which we thought would civically engage young adults in the Central Valley. Stuck in an unequal partnership, we were used more for our labor than we were for our creative minds. This hindered us and our partner organizations in discovering how to actively engage young adults. After weeks of working with MFV and MOP and learning two different organizing styles, one reflecting a civic-based approach and the other community-based, we were able to determine what techniques worked for our group and which did not. This allowed us to become more cohesive and organized, making it easier to create a balanced partnership with the organizations.

The Registration Rap: Crafting the Mobilization Message

Diana De Jesus

Our efforts to get the mobilization message across, for me, turned out to be the hardest part of doing voter registration for the first time. Our message, our targeted voter, and time interacted in the process, so communicating our message effectively required getting a coherent grasp of our audience, and learning efficient time management. Whether we ever found that efficient message is hard to tell, but in the process we collectively delivered and received a variety of approaches to voter registration.

We initiated our mission with the question: Who is our targeted potential voter? The decision to pick a specific target -- young adult Latinos -- could not ignore the various age groups, ethnicities/nationalities, and beliefs the team encountered on the field. The conversations we carried thereby were not as strict as our mission and the result was a rich variation of dialogues. The dilemma: What script could give us the best results, or encourage people to register to vote? Our initial attempts demonstrate our struggle to find the right script. On our first day



VICE members and Mi Familia Vota volunteers getting ready to go out and canvass in Stockton.

outside the *Super Mercados* (grocery stores) we wanted to try a simpler approach: find a way to attract the person(s)' attention, give a brief introduction and layout about the organization and oneself, and get to the point. Something like:

*"Hola, mi nombre es [Diana], somos parte de Mi Familia Vota (MFV),
y estamos hoy registrando a personas para votar, no toma mucho tiempo,
solo necesito esta información, gustaria tomar esta oportunidad?"*

Many of us struggled to stop passersby. Once we did capture their attention, we were faced with additional barriers. Most of those we encountered were undocumented. The script we came in with had not prepared us for this situation, therefore, in most cases we had to politely thank them for their time and wish them a farewell. While in conversation with those who were eligible to vote or knew of someone who could, our approach was different. We were green in the field, but at the end of the day we really wanted to leave everyone with a positive message.

The goal was to personally not get discouraged, and keep each other motivated. I use these personal experiences to give a sense of some of the many interactions we had in the communities we worked in. When we did voter registration in Stockton on the 4th of July, three of the team members and I approached a woman sitting out on the lawn waiting for the show to start. We happened to make eye contact, so I approached her with an extended arm in gesture of a handshake and, to everyone's surprise, the woman looked away and ignored my gesture. Of course, I felt personally offended and shocked, but smiled it off. Instead, I looked to her other side and made eye contact with the person next to her, but this time I did not reach to shake that person's hand. Luckily, this person did not ignore me. Once, we started to explain who we were, and what we were doing I could see the women who had ignored me showed skepticism. She spoke up and accused us of fraud. One of our team members responded and started to explain that we were college students, as she took out her school ID. In domino effect, we all took out our IDs, one by one. The lady flushed with embarrassment, and laughed at her own reaction. She looked over at me and apologized.

In other cases it was not the people that challenged us, but our own language. One day in Merced, we encountered an elderly lady who spoke little English, no Spanish, and those were the only languages we knew how to speak. My team partner got her to talk, so we knew she spoke some English. I tried to explain to her more about the process, but I could tell she did not understand. There could have been a more informative approach, but my partner was able to obtain the necessary information to get her registered to vote.

Sometimes the communication challenge was on our end. Some of our team members were not as proficient in Spanish as others, but with the help of other team members, they were able to overcome that barrier. In one of our first practice run-throughs, one of our team members in the moment could only think to say: “Quieres Voter Registration?”, because he could not think of the Spanish equivalent to voter registration. We wanted to get people registered to vote, and at times it was difficult. But the more we knew about the voting process, the more material we had to keep people engaged, of all age groups and ethnicities/nationalities.

Before the registration process even began, we had to make our targeted voter feel comfortable, and that included building a sense of trust. Our Mi Familia Vota shirts helped this process, as conversation starters -- and they also provided a purpose or mission. The MFV mission was not entirely our own, though we later found ways to bring them together. They wanted to register more Latinos in general, while we wanted to specifically reach more young adult Latinos. But confusion was still a common response. Many thought we were in the storefronts registering Mexicans who wanted to cast an absentee ballot for Mexico’s 2012 presidency. Though voter registration for Mexico’s second-ever cross-border election had closed six months earlier, their presidential race was just days away, so it was getting a lot of coverage in the Spanish language media. When we realized this, we began to specifically mention that we were registering for the 2012 general elections in the United States. If they could not vote, in most cases due to their citizenship status, then we inquired whether they knew of someone who could: a close relative, or friend. Many were hesitant to provide information about their relatives and some immediately claimed to know of no one who could vote. In response, to those who told us of someone they knew, we provided them with a voter registration form to take with them and indicated with a slight pencil mark the required fill-in sections. There was not much interaction at the storefronts, but we were able to get a sense of how to interact with people, and how to prevent a conversation from becoming an argument.

Our brief experience with storefronts, however, was enough to encourage us to pursue other avenues. We decided to turn our energy towards canvassing. Canvassing, or door knocking, involves door-to-door conversations and allowed us to have deeper communication with our targeted voters in the comfort of their homes. Canvassing proved to be a less aggressive approach to storefronts. As outsiders, we relied on our partner organizations to decide on the areas/neighborhoods that would be best to cover. We were often on unfamiliar ground, but for starters we had one topic in common with our target: voter registration. During the early weeks of canvassing, I noticed that if we rushed the conversation into the voter registration form -- or, alternatively, if we took too long getting to the voter registration form -- our targeted voter would either get skeptical or ask you to repeat yourself. We did not want the voter registration

form itself to unintentionally become a turnoff, because we could have been taken for solicitors. We had to be careful about how we presented ourselves. We always smiled, were friendly, to ease the conversation and not appear aggressive or money driven. After all, even though we were not asking for money, we were asking for valuable personal information. We did not have much to work with to present a sense of legitimacy besides the MFV shirts and the clipboard holding the voter registration forms. In most, if not all, of the cases when the door opened there stood two young adult Latinos in white shirts with the MFV logo, pen, clipboard in hand and a big smile.

Our goal in the conversation was to make the person feel as comfortable as possible. Unlike the storefronts, where we felt rushed, here, the approach allowed for a longer layout of why we were out registering people to vote and how that mattered to them. Our script was still in its early stages, but it felt more like a conversation that could evolve into a friendly exchange. Over time our conversations had meaning and could become personal, but we each had our own skeleton script we could structure our conversations around, based on our audience. A simple script:

**TM1: Hola! Me llamo Diana y el/la es mi companero/a X. Somos estudiantes y estamos con Mi Familia Vota, una organización por todo California (point to shirt). Hoy estamos caminando en la vecindad para hacer más fácil el registro para votar... no solo en las elecciones para presidente sino para las estatales también. Creemos que es muy importante que todos voten y además es muy importante que la comunidad Latina salga a votar. ¿Le gustaría tomar esta oportunidad? (point to the voter registration form)...no toma mucho tiempo.*

*(*PT shows hesitation as she/he looks at the form)*

TM2: En realidad no toma mucho tiempo, y estamos aquí para tratar de contestar sus preguntas sobre el proceso.

TM1: Mire, aquí esta el formulario. Aquí yo voy a necesitar su nombre, dirección, dónde recibe su correo, etc...al último yo le voy a entregar esta parte de abajo como su recibo, si usted no recibe algo en dos semanas o poco más llame a este numero...y ya ve no toma mucho tiempo.

(PT looks at form and shrugs shoulders as to signal "why not")

TM2: Nuestro equipo hizo una tarjetita con todas las propuestas de este año. Tómela y allí va a encontrar nuestra información por si tiene preguntas.

*TM1 is used for the terms Team Member One, and same with TM2

*PT is used for the terms potential voter, the person we are trying to get registered to vote

No one conversation was ever entirely like another, but they all taught us something. On one of our canvassing quests, the whole team decided to do a sweep, in other words, go through an entire street together. My team partner and I arrived at a small apartment complex, and went door-to-door knocking until we got one person to open the door. She was a young mom in her 20s, with one daughter, and her partner could not vote. Inside, I was filled with excitement that we had been lucky enough to encounter a young adult Latina. My team partner went ahead and briefly introduced us. Our approach was no longer generic, like at the storefronts, but one we had practiced as we walked throughout the neighborhood. He told her who we were, and why we were doing this, specifically as to *why* we cared, versus, saying because we care. Then I would follow and explain to her that the process itself is short and not time consuming, and I always made sure to mention that once they filled out the form I would hand them the bottom portion as their receipt. After doing similar introductions all day long, there was no more hesitation in our voices. Then we followed up by explaining why we believed voting should matter to them. Regardless of her political preference, we explained to her that there were some important ballot propositions on education. We again emphasized how the propositions mattered to us, and -- keeping in mind that she had a child -- we expressed potential concern for the propositions on K-12 and higher education. We handed her an information card that our team had made, with all the propositions on it, including short explanations. In our approach, we explained why we voted, and gave an informative assessment of the effects of the propositions on the ballot, to explain why others should vote as well. When we walked away, with a completed voter registration form in hand, we wondered if we had said enough, but we also could not ignore people's hesitations.

Our team members in Merced had great success at their popular evening Farmers Market, and we decided to try a similar approach in a nearby flea market, in Crows Landing. This approach proved to be a little more difficult than our other attempts. The flea market involved a rush of people under barely bearable heat. We did not have a booth like the vendors, nor did we have a stand at the entrances, like the ticket booths. Sunscreen and cloth were our protection, and if lucky, sometimes nearby shade. Similar to the storefronts, our approach was more aggressive than canvassing and unlike canvassing the environment for connecting with the targeted voter not as comfortable as at their homes. Some crucial differences however, were

closest to our mission -- at the flea market, we registered more first-time voters, there was a wider age group, and more eligible voters. Be that as it may, the heat did not work to our advantage, and it was difficult to keep the person engaged under the heat. We were careful with those few who did stop to listen despite the heat, as best we could in the least amount of time. Sometimes this short and quick approach was less informative.

One day at the flea market my partner and I managed to persuade a group of young men to listen to us. Usually it was easier for the bigger groups to ignore us. This group, for whatever reason, decided to stop and listen to us. They stopped and stared at us, some listening, while others tried to intimidate us. We were just happy they stopped. My partner took the floor, introduced ourselves and explained to them why we stopped them and why it was important that they listen to us. But there was one guy with shades, chin slightly up and a serious face that was very stiff throughout our greeting. The others started to tell us that they were not citizens. They pointed at the young man and said that he was. I decided to address him directly and asked him if he was registered to vote, and without much consideration he told me he was not. I talked to him about the propositions and what they were. Then I started to explain to him and everyone what it can mean to have a proposition pass or not. I could see him becoming engaged in what I was saying. When I asked him if he had ever seen a voter registration form, he said no. I went ahead and showed him and the others how it looked like, I explained the basics. I got to the last part of the form and told him he only had to be 18 and older and a U.S. citizen to register and he told me that he would be 18 in a year. I laughed at the irony and I explained to him that we forgot to ask him that first. The group, including the young man joined in the humor, and everyone had become engaged in the conversation. We thanked them for their time. I like to think that we planted a voter seed in that young man. It is difficult to leave someone with nothing, simply because they cannot vote. This is where we understood that our message had to be a comprehensive one, that catered to the needs that the many constituencies presented during our summer stay in the Central Valley.

Developing and Disseminating the Message

America Valdes

Introduction

In the field of electoral mobilization, it is essential to develop and distribute an outreach message to rally underrepresented communities. Television, radio, and the print media have been the traditional means by which political information has been distributed. However, the growing use of digital technologies by the general population has increased the use of new outlets such as blogs, digital magazines, and social media forums. Virtual social networks have given activists immediate access to a vast repository of social groups capable of consuming and distributing messaging, as well as the possibility to target audiences with greater precision. Digital media and social networks have become essential strategic tools used to create and circulate outgoing political messaging to the community. This is partly due to the accessibility of dissemination; any individual with access to the Internet or a computer network is capable of publishing content in blogs, digital magazines, and social media forums. The popularity of digital media, accessibility, and the increasing dependency on virtual social networks are some of the factors that have contributed to the rising use of these mediums as an alternative outlet for political mobilization. However, the use of digital media for mobilization becomes limited in more rural, socially polarized regions, with lower levels of Internet access.

Our summer voter education project used digital technologies and alternative forms of digital media for voter education and outreach, but the experience also revealed limitations, especially involving dissemination of the message within these specific underrepresented communities.

Members of the voter education project (V.I.C.E.) used digital technologies (Google Docs, wiggio, email, Skype) to maintain communication and organization with local activists and community organizations within the Central Valley. Through the creation of a Facebook page and a Wordpress blog, the summer voter education project was able to circulate outgoing political information. Social media also served as an outlet for political mobilization by informing residents within underrepresented communities about events geared towards political enfranchisement.

The vast majority of the underrepresented Latino communities within the Central Valley had limited access due to general lower rates of home Internet use (55%) and lower levels of

broadband access (45%) amongst the Latino population¹. Therefore, the summer voter education project still had to reach out to traditional Spanish language media (television, radio, newspaper) to promote community events targeted towards the underrepresented Latino community. Conventional face-to-face strategies for political mobilization campaigns, such as canvassing and tabling at local events, were also implemented to promote the social media outlets (Facebook page, email, Wordpress) in an attempt to reach the individuals at a personal level. Social media cannot be the only tool for political messaging in a specific community. To reach the target population — in this case young Latinos and their social networks — digital media must be applied, in addition to traditional mediums and conventional grassroots organizing methods, in order to create a personal message that can be circulated at a larger scale.

Part I: Organizing and Developing Unity through Digital Technologies

The summer voter education project also used digital technologies as a tool for maintaining a cohesive structure and internal organization amongst students and allied activists. Open editing software such as Google Docs allowed various individuals, who were situated in different regions of the Central Valley, to create and edit documents simultaneously. The eight students involved in the project were divided into two regions. One group of four students resided in Patterson (Stanislaus County) while the other group remained in Merced (Merced County). The physical distance between us furthered our reliance on digital technologies like Skype and email to coordinate our political mobilization projects. Weekly debriefing meetings were carried out through video conferencing, in an attempt to keep cohesion between the two groups. Once a sense of cohesion was established amongst the group, the next step was to exercise our unity in order to maintain autonomy from the affiliated organizations. The group members found it vital to maintain autonomy as a way to be independent from the structural system of each organization, one that could impede creative exploration into different political mobilization strategies. The group of students first established a shared email address as a practical way to keep everyone equally informed. Later it became an essential networking tool where the group introduced itself to the community as a single coordinated entity. The creation of the Facebook page and the Wordpress blog further established the autonomy of the group by separating the project and mission statement from our affiliated partner organizations.

¹ Gretchen Livingston. "Latinos and Digital Technology, 2010," *Pew Research Hispanic Center*. (2011) <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/02/09/latinos-and-digital-technology-2010/> If this data is national, then actual rates might be lower for rural, lower income folks, esp farmworker families – but how much free wifi is available in local cafes or libraries?

Networking

Most of us in the summer voter education project were not native to the Central Valley. Therefore, networking became an essential tool to help us connect with local activists that were willing to collaborate —beyond those involved directly with our partner organizations. The host organizations and other allies helped set up networking meetings where the group was able to find key activists in the Merced, Stockton, and Modesto area. Maintaining constant contact with activists through digital technologies was specifically crucial for mobilization and organization. We largely relied on email to communicate and familiarize ourselves with the key political activists located throughout multiple counties in the Central Valley. Through the establishment of partnerships with local activists we were then able to collaborate in organizing several voter education events. One of the events that required a reliance on digital technologies was the “Carne Asada with the Candidates”, where Stockton area local representatives and candidates were invited to speak in front of community members about their campaign goals. The event



Alexis Buz, a community activist from the Stockton area, who was affiliated with Mi Familia Vota, CHIRLA (Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles) and CDN (California Dream Network) helped organize the “Carne Asada with the Candidates” event.

was organized by a community activist from the Stockton area, Alexis Buz, who was affiliated with Mi Familia Vota, CHIRLA (Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles) and CDN (California Dream Network). Many young activists in the Stockton area, and some from as far as Southern California, helped to coordinate the event virtually. One of the members in our group, who was in the Stockton meeting, collaboratively planned the itinerary of the event via cell phone and email with a CHIRLA adviser who was stationed in Los Angeles. Internet software such as Wiggio, where groups are able to share and edit documents in a virtual meeting room, played an essential role in the planning stages of the event because we were only able to have a couple of person-to-person meetings with the activists due to geographical distance. Since most of the collaborators lived or attended school near Stockton, distance was a constant constraint to the group stationed in Merced and the Modesto area. The flyer for the event was a collaborative project between a local graphic designer and myself. The entire process was done through data sharing websites. Once it was time to invite the community to the “Carne Asada with the



Team members Diana de Jesus (not shown) and Mariah Melena having a conference call with Eddie Sanchez and Mireya Mateo-Gomez to plan the “Carne Asada with the Candidates” event and further outreach tactics.

Candidates,” we used Facebook to promote and encourage young adults in the area to attend and invite their parents to the event. The Pew Research Center report shows that 85% of Latinos between the ages of 18 to 29 use the Internet, while “this share drops incrementally for each subsequent age group.”² Since many of the young activists who helped coordinate the event were native to the area, they had access to their digital social network, which included many young adults in Stockton. Therefore, in this circumstance we were able to successfully outreach to the Latino community in the desired area because we had access to local social networks; due in part to the virtual collaboration of young activists from the Stockton and Modesto area. Even in regions affected by the “digital divide,” digital technologies have become a standard tool in political mobilization, as more activists rely on online tools to organize and coordinate events and to disseminate the message, making space and time a less influential factor.

Part II: Disseminating the Message (Advantages and Limitations)

The original focus of the summer voter education project was to encourage young adults of Latino descent who were part of underrepresented communities in the Central Valley to become politically informed. As we encountered the socio-economic and ethno-racial landscape, we realized that “resources and opportunities of the region are unevenly divided between its residents, with gaps based on race and ethnicity.”³ The group quickly realized that the targeted population had to expand to young adults’ broader social networks, including family, friends, and community members.⁴ The underrepresented Latino population in the area also contains many mixed status households, where some family members, friends, or neighbors might be labeled as undocumented or have a permanent resident status. Therefore, the group had to take into consideration the newly expanded targeted audience and their use of digital/social media.

Traditional Media

The lower levels of broadband access and Internet use within the Latino community are reasons that organizations, like Mi Familia Vota, rely on both traditional Spanish language media (Univision, local radio, newspapers) and canvassing, in order to promote political mobilization. One of the events we participated in, which had significant coverage by the local media, was the “Todos A Votar Bus Tour,” organized by Mi Familia Vota. The event, headlined by Eliseo Medina, brought together key activists and community members from the Central Valley as a way to encourage political participation within the Latino community. The event began with a press conference that culminated with cameras outside the community hall, La Jamaica, ready to send

² Ibid., 1.

³ The Great Valley Center. Asserting the Region Via Indicators of Community Well-Being. January 2, 2012, http://www.greatvalley.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/2nd_2006_Community.pdf.

⁴ See Lucero Aguiñiga’s report “Young Latinos and their Mixed Status Social Networks”

off Mi Familia Vota volunteers to register Latinos in Stockton. The trouble arose once we were sent off to register people in the middle of the day with a camera following our every move. In the time span of an hour, not one person agreed to be registered to vote in front of the camera. The next day all members of the group watched the news segment featured on the local Univision channel. The segment, although optimistic, also highlighted the difficulty volunteers faced when registering people via canvassing door-to-door.⁵ At the end of the segment, a screen with a phone number and a website encouraged the community to obtain more information about the campaign. The various layers of media involvement in the “Todos A Votar” event exhibit the complex relationship between digital media, traditional media, and grassroots organizing methods as tools to encourage digital advocacy and political mobilization. In a focus group conducted in the Central Valley by V.I.C.E. (Voters Increasing Civic Engagement) it was established that despite the rising use of digital media, traditional media still has an impact on individuals’ political views, “I think that [the media] is a big factor in the central valley [we] get our information from the media. You can ask them any question and their answer is something you hear in the media.” The statement indicates that although there are various ways in which a particular political message can be distributed, traditional media remains a prominent tool used by the community to engage in political discourse. However, direct political involvement within the community cannot be achieved through virtual or visual media. The news segment highlighted the importance of door-to-door interaction while promoting virtual informational tools as a way to further access information.

Social Media

Young adults of Latino descent in the area had a greater likelihood to access the digital/social media outlets (Facebook page and Wordpress). However, through the Facebook data overview of demographics and locations, it is evident that most of the page likes are concentrated in Santa Cruz. This is largely due to the fact that all of the students who were a part of V.I.C.E. attend the University of California, Santa Cruz. Despite the concentration of the majority of the “likes” in Santa Cruz, collectively, the entire Central Valley area from Sacramento to Merced has the second highest number of “likes”, while the highest concentration of age demographic that “like” the page is 18-24. Although we were not natives to the Central Valley, the Facebook data overview shows that the team was able to reach out to the desired young adult demographic

⁵ “Todos a Votar: motivación a los Latinos,” Univision Sacramento, accessed February 11, 2013, <http://univisionsacramento.univision.com/videos/video/2012-07-27/todos-a-votar-motivan-a>

throughout the area. This was largely due to heavy networking with the host organizations and the use of traditional grassroots organizing methods, such as canvassing and tabling. Throughout the summer we had some difficulty finding young adults, therefore we began to reach out to established institutions that involve young adults (universities, community colleges, programs for at-risk youth, churches, and job assistance workshops). We encouraged those who had any questions about the political system to contact the group via email or Facebook.

V.I.C.E. realized that digital technologies played a pivotal role in the construction and dissemination of political messaging. We also concluded that digital media would not be enough for political mobilization in the Central Valley, due to its diverse social, economic, and political landscape. Traditional forms of media and grassroots organization remain crucial for reaching voters across the digital divide.

Inter-Racial and Inter-Ethnic Dynamics of Face-to-Face Mobilization

Eddie Sanchez

Our summer project to mobilize young Latinos had started with a bang on our first full day in California's Central Valley, we were welcomed to the community by Mi Familia Vota and UFW co-founder Dolores Huerta. The welcome event ended with a brief training, and then we were on our way to do voter registration for the first time as a team outside Latino supermarkets in Crows Landing. I remember being embarrassed because my Spanish was so bad, especially because almost everyone we encountered that day spoke only Spanish. Yet despite my unintelligible Spanish, I was still warmly received. In the coming days we moved from storefronts to canvassing neighborhoods. The summer project relied on canvassing and face-to-face interactions as a means of encouraging underrepresented communities to get civically engaged.¹ Canvassing door-to-door immediately proved to be a strong tool because it allowed for meaningful discussions that would result in informed and excited voters, but often the first impression and reaction to our presence was beyond our control. In most of these interactions at the door, what people assumed about us and perceived of our appearances seemed to determine how our presence was to be received. Our appearance, as volunteers and canvassers, would be translated by those answering the door into social and political assumptions, allowing those we talked with to associate or disassociate with us as a young person of color. Our identity as Latinos allowed us to easily connect with other Latinos, but also seemed to distance us from some non-Latino white people. This realization about how the dynamics of race and ethnicity affected our outreach work allowed me to understand why, despite speaking Spanish horribly, I was still welcomed by Latinos; also, why I was met with some slammed doors at the homes of white people.

My realization that there were racial patterns in the responses to our canvassing only took a few days. In a few hours of interactions we could easily talk to about 20 to 40 individuals about the importance of voting and the ease of getting registered to vote. In that timeframe we could potentially encounter a few sour or mean responses to our work, typically in the form of distaste for presidential politics. I believe some people took any opportunity available to express their views on presidential politics, so we could get long and detailed perspectives about candidates as a response to questions like "would you like to register to vote?" Every now and then,

¹ Lisa García Bedolla and Melissa R. Michelson. *Mobilizing Inclusion: Transforming the Electorate through Get-Out-the-Vote Campaigns*. (Yale University Press, 2012), xiv.

we would encounter someone who was blatantly rude or responded offensively, and it started to become noticeable that most negative responses were from white people. I recall my own experience with a white male, about 30 years old, who told me in a militaristic tone that he didn't have to vote because he had a "sidearm." I was initially confused by the man's response because I knew that a "sidearm" was a handgun, but why was he trying to make his gun known to me? The man was truly confusing because he initially welcomed me in a nice way when I approached him and his family at a farmers market. It was not until I had brought up voting that he felt the need to tell me about his gun. I did not think much of it until I fully became aware of the racial and ethnic dynamics operating in our face-to-face interactions; and I believe that man intended to intimidate me from registering him or his family.

I first became more fully aware of these dynamics from the actions of a teammate. We had hit the midpoint of our voter registration push for the day, and it was a part of the agenda to take a break and debrief on successes. On my way to notify the team that it was time to debrief, I noticed a teammate pass by a large group of white people to talk to a middle-aged Latina. During our debrief I asked the teammate about what I had noticed; the debrief developed into a discussion over ethnic and racial response patterns. The teammate had already had enough negative responses from white individuals, to the point where avoidance was preferred. This teammate had avoided white people while canvassing where possible, but somehow managed to have registered the most voters. What this teammate had done was to use their own identity, such as race, ethnicity, age and gender, to associate with others who shared those identities. The face-to-face discussions successfully related the importance of voting to the identities they shared as individuals, and the result had been a higher registration rate with this approach. This was not an isolated political phenomenon. Various applied research experiments have shown that Latino canvassers are more successful at mobilizing Latino voters.²

Unfortunately, in our voter registration trainings with the partner organizations the importance and presence of race and ethnicity were never discussed. I initially based my understanding of how race and ethnicity were present partly on the negative responses. In spite of our very explicit nonpartisan goals, we were suspected of supporting the reelection of president Obama. I interpreted these accusations as a response to the historic involvement by young people of color in the 2008 elections. Our canvassing took place four years later, and the heat of Romney versus Obama was just as hot as the Central Valley weather where we talked to potential voters. The (re)election of a black president had polarized political expectations along racial lines in this region; therefore, we as youth of color were politically expected to be agents

² Ibid., 91.

in support of the Obama campaign. In every voter registration conversation we made it clear that we were nonpartisan, but we still experienced responses from both candidates' supporters who projected their assumptions onto us. Obama supporters would give us a wink and Romney supporters would affirm their Republican stance as they slammed the door. Because our team members varied in skin color, this problem appeared to occur for some of us who were darker in complexion. It became frustrating for some of us that the color of our skin influenced how we would be received, especially when the negative responses shut out our chances to disseminate general information on the California state ballot initiatives. Some of us were trapped in a "racial imagination", a combination of racial assumptions, in which we were to politically perform according to social expectations as second class citizens. Our entrapment in the "racial imagination" expected us to be racially submissive³ to negative responses.

The real cause of the racial and ethnic dynamics may have had less to do with the political atmosphere and more to do simply with ethno racial identities. Because previous applied research experiments have proven that canvassers sharing ethnic and racial identities with voters they target is important for successful outreach campaigns, I imagine that the lack of shared identities can limit outreach. The presidential elections certainly had contributed to ethno racial polarization, but racism has a long history in this region. Our presence was automatically racialized in the eyes of others, despite our purpose of walking through these neighborhoods; our racialized identities both determined who would and would not give us their time, and what our purpose in their neighborhood could be.⁴ Perhaps if this summer project had been conducted in earlier elections, any number of hot political topics could have triggered responses based on my perceived racialized identity. I could have expected similar responses to Latino canvassers in the ethnic and racially polarized California elections of Propositions 187 and 209.⁵

This realization of racial and ethnic dynamics playing a role in face-to-face voter education was new to me. I had done voter registration and mobilization before, but primarily on community college campuses in southern California, where the population was mostly young adults of color. This was the context for my prior experiences with voter mobilization. I had never been shut down or received in such negative ways before. My encounter with race and ethnicity during the summer project has increased my understanding of the dynamics in reaching and mobilizing voters. Our summer project often went through very ethnically diverse neighborhoods due to the partner organizations targeting high density neighborhoods or likely voters. Our canvassing in these diverse neighborhoods would randomize our application of a

3 Devon W. Carbado, "Racial Naturalization." *American Quarterly*, 57, no. 3, 2005. 633-658.

4 Ibid, 651.

5 Gabriel Frayne Jr., "Race for Latino California." *Nation*, 267, no. 13, 1998. 21-24.

shared identity because we never knew the identity of who would answer the door. In these instances our approach would react to the person answering the door, we would speak Spanish when there were hints to do so and/or relate our Latino identities as a way to break the ice. We sometimes worked in Latino neighborhoods, and often times those would be the days with more positive and memorable outcomes; in these neighborhoods, some of our members would be invited into homes to register a family, talk politics and even for a meal. It was in Latino neighborhoods where I learned I could have a comfortable face-to-face interaction because of shared identities; my race and ethnicity could get a foot in the door then provide a foundation for a comfortable discussion. Our experience and previous experiments show that if a canvasser shares an identity with the voter the response will more likely be positive; therefore, ethnic and racial identity should be taken into deep consideration when targeting voters. The racial makeup of the team should help decide where they place their energy. If teams are designed to target a specific group there can be likelihood of bringing out group consciousness⁶ to contribute to voter mobilization; also, I feel that this could be applied to the intersection of identities along sexual preference, citizenship status and gender lines. Race and ethnicity stood out the most for this summer project team because there appeared to be a shared identity as Latinos, and we could relate in some instances where our shared identity made the difference in an interaction, for better or worse. I say in some instances because though we were all Latinos, we were diverse in character, appearance and the whole of our intersectional identities; so there were times when face-to-face interactions were guided by the intersection of race, ethnicity, citizenship status, and gender.

The takeaway message here is that despite any attempts to be color blind, your race and ethnicity will play a role in mobilization.⁷ Your race and ethnicity will already have a social meaning and assumptions that will be imposed upon you as you reach out to do voter education, even if it is completely inconsistent with who you are⁸ or what your goal may be. More importantly, your race and ethnicity can be used in your favor when mobilizing and can spur mobilization through a shared identity or consciousness.⁹ It is important to understand these benefits and limiting factors of race and ethnicity in voter mobilization in order to strengthen voter mobilization efforts.

6 Jane Junn and Natalie Masuoka. "Identities in Context: Politicized Racial Group Consciousness Among Asian American and Latino Youth." *Applied Developmental Science* 12, no. 2, 2008, 93-101.

7 García Bedolla and Michelson. *Mobilizing Inclusion*, 91.

8 Devon W. Carbado, "Racial Naturalization." *American Quarterly*, 57, no. 3, 2005, 639.

9 Jane Junn and Natalie Masuoka. "Identities in Context: Politicized Racial Group Consciousness Among Asian American and Latino Youth." *Applied Developmental Science* 12, no. 2, 2008, 95.

Disenfranchisement: Criminalization and its Effect on Voter Registration

David Padilla-Ramos

“In most other countries the national government takes responsibility for registering voters and there is no distinction between citizens and registered voters.”- Locked Out, Manza and Uggen

It was early in the morning and we had almost all had very little sleep the night before, but we were looking forward to registering young folks to vote. The temperature was well over the three digit mark, but we were determined to find young potential voters in South Modesto. My first encounter had been successful and I was thinking to myself, “this is easy, no big deal talking to people.” Then I approached a young man in his early 20s and this is exactly the constituency that we were targeting for purposes of our project. I was excited and I enthusiastically asked him if he wanted to register to vote. He stood there looking at me with a very skeptical look and he responded, “No I can’t vote. I’ve been to jail already.” I did not know what to answer, I began to sweat nervously and the heat was not helping. I knew there was some type of resource to offer or some direction I could have pointed him towards to reinstate his voting rights. I quickly shook his hand and said, “Thank you for your time.” I walked away nervous and insecure because I found out that canvassing and registering people to vote was not about numbers but tapping into the political power that these marginalized groups have and will continue to have for many years to come. There was vital information and resources that we needed to carry because there were specific needs that the Central Valley presented during our summer stay.

Encounter after encounter, we noticed that a large number of young males of color had gone through the criminal justice system and/or the prison industrial complex. Through the constant interaction with young adults (18-roughly 25), we noticed the persistent idea of “imagined disenfranchisement,” meaning that these young men were quick to see themselves excluded from the political process and the electorate. Many of the people that had already been convicted of a crime, whether it was a misdemeanor or felony, were not informed on how they could be reintegrated into the electorate. In California, restoration of voting eligibility is immediate and all those who have completed their sentence and/or have completed their parole can register to vote.¹ Yet people with convictions believed that they were essentially disenfranchised for the rest of their lives and that there was no avenue for individuals with criminal histories to be-

1 Jeff Manza and Christopher Uggen, *Locked Out: Felon Disenfranchisement and American Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 85

come part of the political process. While the arrest rates in the Central Valley are very high and indeed target Latino and Black youth, we also met young men who had not gone through this system but felt alienated and distant from the political process.² At the same time, we also noticed that some of the most important support and words of encouragement for our work came from people who had had systematic encounters with the law. They were quick to point us in the direction where we could find family members and community people who were able to register to vote. This reminded us that while their voting rights had been revoked many of the ex-felons were still aware of the impact that voting could have in their lives and communities.

In fact, we came in completely uninformed about this sector of the population and our first encounters were difficult because we had no idea what resources or information to offer. We were not aware of the law in California and how it was that ex-felons could have their voting rights restored. In one encounter I asked a Latino male in his early 20s if he wanted to register to vote. His immediate answer was, “No I’m on probation. I don’t know if I can.” I was surprised and I did not know how to reply to that or what kind of information I could have offered him. I was completely in the dark about this situation, so I quickly turned to my partner canvasser -but she was just as lost as I was. We walked away knowing that there was something else that we could have done to engage him in some way. This was just one of our many encounters with people who had been convicted of a felony or misdemeanor, whether they were guilty or not. As we went along, we learned about the voter restoration law in California and we began to inform people of their rights and the way in which they could regain their right to vote.³ Even after we had informed ourselves about the law and were able to inform other ex-felons of their rights, there was a real sense that voting was not for them and that people like “them” did not vote. There was a clear feeling of alienation and distrust in the very apparatus that had arrested and incarcerated them, whether they were proven guilty or not. As I mentioned before, we found support from many of the ex-felons that we encountered and it was possible that they were motivated to encourage other community members because of their electoral alienation.

It is also important to know that there is an important distinction between being on parole and probation. Both are forms of state punishment for a crime. The former is an early release from prison due to “good behavior” or more often due to overcrowding in state prisons. Parole is administered by the state (California). The latter is “a court-mandated time of supervision in the community, generally as an alternative to prison.”⁴ This process is administered at

2 California Sentencing Institute, <http://casi.cjcj.org/Juvenile/2010>, (December 2012)

3 <http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/sharing-ideas/a-voting-guide-for-inmates.pdf>

4 Lauren E. Glaze and Thomas P. Bonczar, U.S. Department of Justice, *Probation and Parole in the United States, 2010* (Washington: BJS 2011)

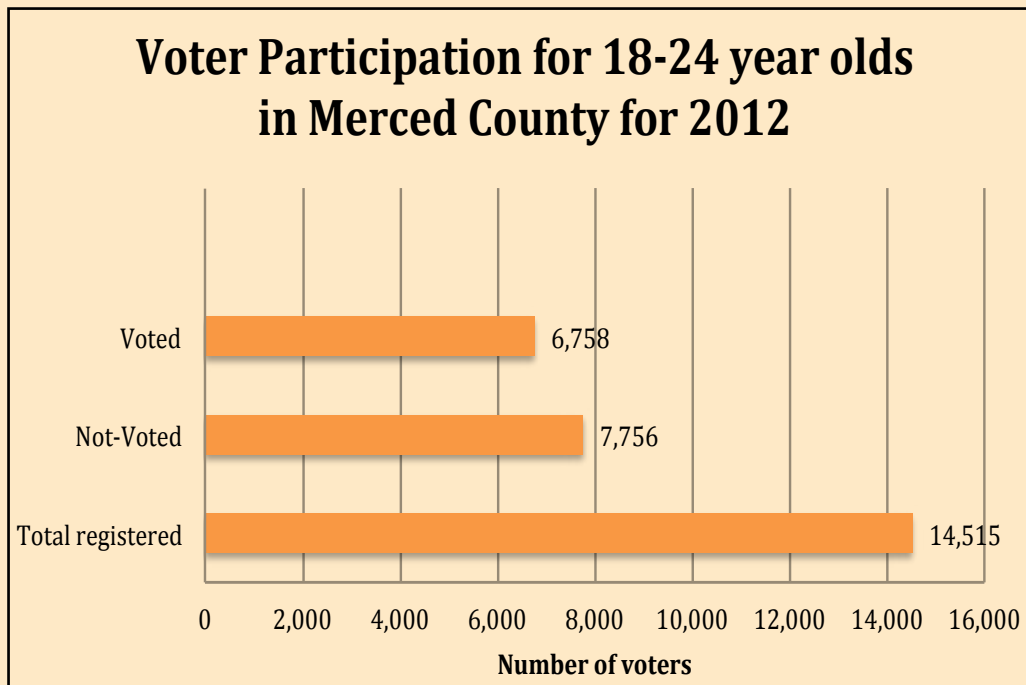
the county level and there are probation officers that keep track of people on this “court-mandated supervision”. In California people who are on parole cannot vote but people who are on probation can.⁵ Once a person has served his or her parole time then they have to re-register to vote to reinstate their voting rights. This was essential information that we needed to know to better inform people about the laws that sometimes are very difficult to understand. The information was not difficult to find but we were pressured by quantitative goals that were established by the organizations that we worked with, and their priorities did not include informing ex-felons about voter reregistration. Our project did not foresee the inclusion of ex-felons and we kept working to meet quantitative demands instead of creating a campaign that collected information and disseminated the resources to the different types of potential voters we encountered.

Because of the dead ends we repeatedly faced when encountering ex-felons, our registration efforts were very selective and we focused on a certain segment of the population. Some of the people were quick to warn us that they could not vote and that we should not waste our time trying to register them to vote and much less talk to them about the propositions and the candidates. We canvassers were persistent and hoped to engage them with any kind of information, but their historical encounters with people from organizations and government officials had been unfortunate, to say the least. Considerable number of people from the general community we engaged had expressed their desire to vote at some point but they felt that their paths of political participation were systematically limited. The community members expressed a real distaste and distrust in local authorities and generally saw them as serving the smaller white conservative population in the area. We can see this when we compare the incarceration rates between white individuals and young adults of color (Figure 1). When we compare that to the voter turnout between the two groups we can clearly see that incarceration rates do seem to correlate with voter turnout, and therefore on representation in local politics (Figure 2). Furthermore, when we compare it to graduation rates we continue to view discrepancies in the academic achievements of young Latinos (Figure 3).

The support and cooperation that we received from ex-felons was an important driving force to continue our work in the Central Valley. In one instance a young Latino male was sitting outside on his porch. Since he could not vote, he quickly went to find his wife and sister who lived at home. We registered both, and we had tapped into the political power that he had as a family member. Many of the encounters came to highlight the kind of urgency and necessity

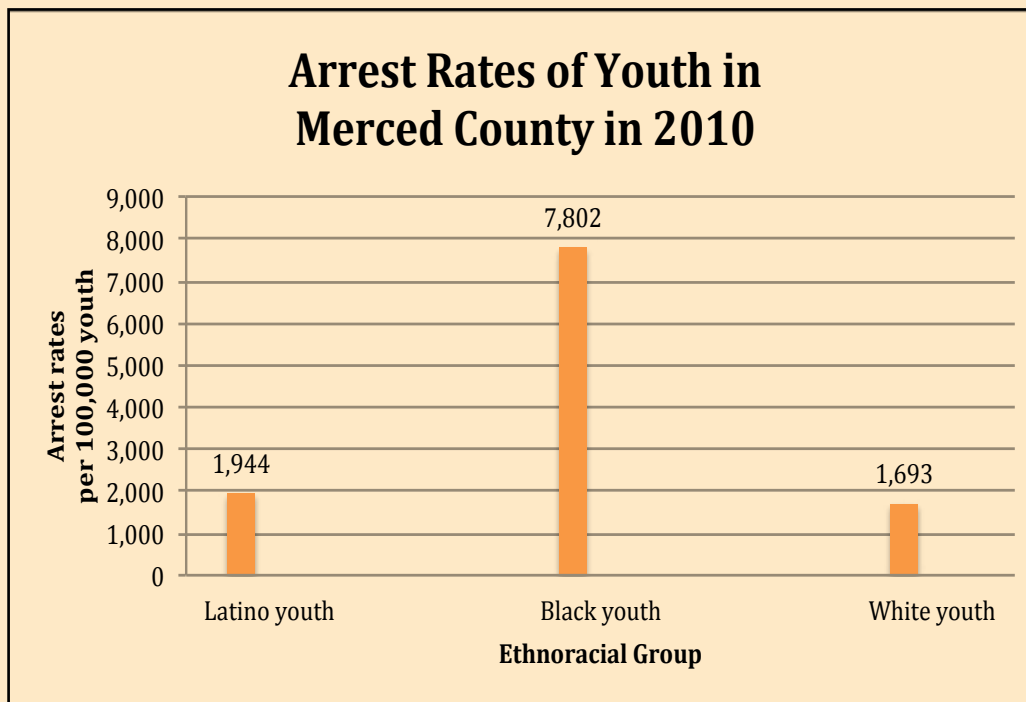
⁵ California Secretary of State, <http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/sharing-ideas/a-voting-guide-for-inmates.pdf>, December 2012.

Figure 1



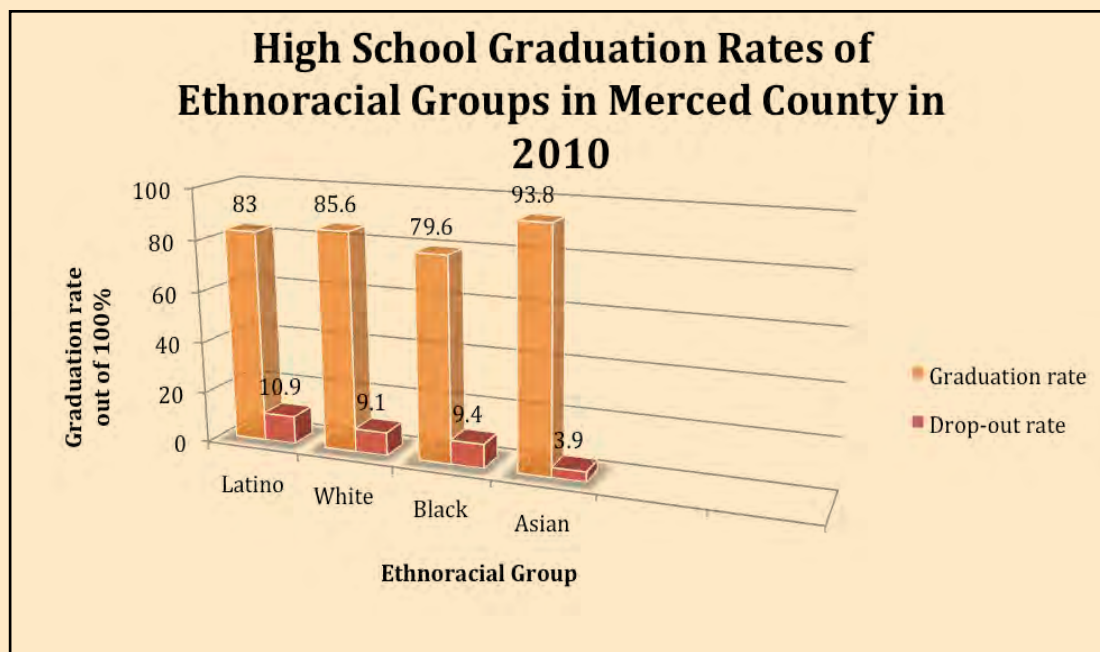
Source: http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/projects/general-election-data-and-gis-maps/copy_of_2010-general-election-data-and-gismaps/Table%20V5.%20California_Registered_Voter_Turnout_by_Age_2012_General_Election_for_Counties.pdf

Figure 2



Source: <http://casi.cjcj.org/Juvenile/2010>

Figure 3



Source: <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/cohortrates/GradRates.aspx?cds=24000000000000&TheYear=2010-11&Agg=O&Topic=Graduates&RC=County&SubGroup=Ethnic/Racial>

that exist in the area. Some of the conversations pointed to other family and community members who were eligible to register to vote. It clearly demonstrated that a majority of the people we encountered were much more connected to their communities than was prematurely assumed by myself and the other canvassers. It demonstrated that they were aware of the importance of registering to vote and participation in local, state, and national elections. People cited the importance of registering to vote because they understood that the general elections were coming up in November and after we informed them of Proposition 36, which would reform the Three Strikes Law in California, they quickly understood that it would have a direct impact in their own community.⁶ In one conversation with an ex-felon, he was optimistic that the Three Strikes Law would be revised because he cited the growing number of friends he had who were going to prison for petty crimes. We clearly see that there is an interest in political engagement, but many of the avenues of political participation are closed and usually not available for individuals who have systematically been put through the failing educational system and then pushed into the growing prison industrial complex.⁷

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (The New Press; 2012).

So, as we noted, the lack of dialogue and inclusion in community campaigns will continue to disenfranchise a group of potential voters that can change the electorate and transform local, state, and national politics. This will continue to foment a culture of political apathy and political disillusion among people who continue to be targeted because of systematic and institutionalized racism. There will continue to be disenfranchised young adults if there is no conversation about trying to reassess the prison industrial complex that does not have the well being of people in mind. Disenfranchisement will forever be in contradiction with the idea of democracy and it will continue to perpetuate punishments that are excessive and unjust. With our project we hope to highlight the obstacles that canvassers and other community organizers face when trying to create a broad-based mobilization campaign in the Central Valley. While the challenges are sometimes daunting they are not impossible and finding the most relevant information on the issues at hand are key to engaging those groups that have been consistently alienated. Voter registration should be the responsibility of the government and it should be that democracy and more importantly civic engagement should be accessible to everyone who wishes to take part in the process. Eliminating the voter registration requirement could attract more voters because it would remove that extra step which discourages people from registering and ultimately voting. While this will not be the only solution to ending political apathy and low voter turnout, it can be a step towards shifting cultural attitudes about civic engagement. When it comes to the ex-felon population, institutionalized efforts to reinstate voting rights should be implemented to reintegrate ex-felons into the electorate. While the state has failed at engaging different groups in the democratic process, I do believe that campaigns such as these and grassroots efforts will continue to be the primary avenue for those underrepresented and underserved groups to become a part of the electorate and continue to redefine citizenship in the United States.

The Forgotten Voters of California's Central Valley: The Lack of Voter Outreach in Farm Worker Communities

Mireya Mateo-Gomez

One late afternoon, as we were door knocking in South Merced, a predominantly ethnically diverse neighborhood, we came across what Eddie believed was a farmworker housing complex. This was the first time we had ever canvassed in South Merced, which gave us a different view of the city. Homes here did not seem well-constructed and basic services like hospitals and recreation centers were noticeably absent, in contrast to North Merced. We learned that Eddie had guessed right, after a middle aged man, who seemed to just have gotten out of work by the looks of his clothing and tired face, informed us that the residents of the community were all farm workers who worked picking peaches in nearby orchards . From the surprised looks we received from the residents, it seemed that they rarely received visitors. Many of them only spoke Spanish and were ineligible to vote because of their immigration status, but had children who were eligible to vote . These children of farm workers were the potential voices of their parents in the voting process, but lack of voting dialogue in their households, schools, among peers, and on the canvassers' part marginalizes them in the voting process, making them the forgotten voters of the Central Valley.

Farmworker jobs can be very labor-intensive, depriving them of the time, energy or knowledge to inform their children about the importance of voting. One of the members from the focus group we conducted, which attempted to capture what young adults from the Central Valley had to say about voting, stated that, " I think a lot of the population [in the Central Valley] are working class so I feel that consumes a lot of time, eliminating time to generate thoughts." What this person had to say about working class individuals is very true for the farmworkers we met while canvassing. A typical farm worker can work as early as five in the morning all the way until sunset in the blazing sun, where temperatures can reach as high as 114 degrees in the summer, leaving them with no time to follow the news about politics. By not having the time to follow political news, farmworkers are not able to have political conversations with their children, because they themselves are not informed. This is not always the case for children in middle class families, where their parents' occupation may not be as labor intensive as farmworkers, providing them the time to become informed on political news and discuss the importance of voting with their children.

If young adults from farmworker families were not receiving the message of how important voting is in their household because of the poor communication between them

and their parents, then what about receiving this message in their schools? From talking to some farmworker families it was evident that the schools their children attended were not transmitting well the message of why someone should cast their vote. We asked young adults in our focus group who could've been children of farm workers about the role schools had on their voter participation and they replied:

Respondent 1:

"In classI did not soak [up] the information, I was not ready, not really focused... They [should] start early [teaching us about the voting process in school]. They should have more politics and economics curriculum."

Respondent 2:

"For my personal experience, I did not care. When I was a senior, my econ teacher told me the importance of voting and stuff, but I did not really listen to her, because I did not care. Who cares what your teacher is talking about...But I did not even know anything about politics. I was not concerned with any of the issues I did not even know there was issues. I did not know what the issues were. So I had no concern about voting... until I got into college and then started to learn more. Many people are not really [focusing] on...the bigger picture...I think a lot of people do not know what is going on and they do not really know the importance of voting and [that] the things that are being voted on are going to really affect them a lot..."

From what these individuals had to say about voting, one can see that just telling young people to vote is not enough, it's vital to explain *why* they should vote, how the political process affects them and so on. The dialogue between teachers and students on the importance of voting was apparently not happening for these young adults, and many felt that if the discussion about voting did occur it came too late in their education. They felt that having the conversation about voting, and if possible why it is important, should happen as early as elementary school. This is what some young adults from our focus group had to say about early voting education:

Respondent 1: "They should [have] started teaching us early on [about voting]. not... until senior year ..because it can be a lot...and because most people [do]not have a background [on voting]... when you get to kindergarten they talk to you about the pledge of Allegiance, why can't they tell you *why* you are pledging allegiance?...Kids are not going to listen...not heavy details but little slogans [like] it is important to vote...[Schools need to]...better educate the younger kids [about] the importance of voting...If you just plant [this] seed to the kids when they are young they will understand when they are older [about the importance of voting]..."

Respondent 2: “They should start early. They should have more curriculums over politics and economics...Like she was saying, as soon as you introduce something earlier the more you start ingraining in their thoughts [about the importance of voting].”

Like the influence parents have on young adults, schools also play a big role in informing young adults about the importance of voting. Now what happens if the dialogue about voting does not happen in the households of children of farmworkers or in their schools? Where else would these individuals hear the message?

From the information obtained in our focus groups, peers were another big influence in determining whether young adults participated in the voting process or not. This is what participants had to say about peer involvement in an individual’s participation in the voting process:

Respondent 1: “I think that the environment has [a] huge effect on the way people choose yes or no to vote...Because right now a lot of young people do not care about voting...So if you are with a group of people that do not vote, you [are] most likely not going to vote either...”

Respondent 2:

“Like she was saying, [if] you hang around with [people] that do not vote ... you [will] probably do what they are doing [not vote]...”

So if the dialogue about voting was not occurring in farmworker communities, their schools or maybe not among their peers, where else would these young adults receive the important message on voting? In this situation, civic organizations such as Mi Familia Vota and Merced Organizing Project become essential, but they often can overlook these low-propensity voter communities. One of the reasons I believe this occurs is because organizers assume that children of farm workers carry the same immigration status as their parents, which is not always true. Many children of farmworkers are U.S. citizens, who are eligible to vote, but if organizers assume differently they will contribute towards the exclusion of this group in the voting process.

Informing marginalized communities about the importance of voting was one of our goals, which we were able to do this summer in South Merced’s farmworker communities. There are many other communities out there that need to become informed about voting, and it is in our hands to inform them. By not having conversations about voting we are silencing those that are not aware.

Latino Young Adults and their Mixed Status Social Networks

Lucero Aguiñiga

Our work within the diverse communities in Central California solidified our understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding young adults (predominantly Latinos), and their perceptions of the political process. This work became significant when we considered the barriers and motivations to political integration that young adults experience, especially those within underrepresented communities. We met many young Latinos who, like many others, were a part of social networks of mixed immigration statuses. These networks were composed of complex relationships that young adults had with citizens, undocumented, and/or non-citizen permanent residents within their social sphere. These relationships were often their immediate families (parents, siblings), extended families (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins), friendships, and even extended to their broader community. This unique dynamic within immigrant Latino families led to us to ask whether these social networks could potentially influence the political participation of young adults. Initially we thought that perhaps the historical and institutional disenfranchisement experienced by immigrant Latino families posed a negative effect in the political socialization of the younger generations. This initial idea proved to be a possibility in some cases, but we also found cases where young Latinos became politicized as a form of advocacy and resistance to the disenfranchisement of their social networks. We found that many young adults, especially those with further integration and access to the U.S. social fabric were able to become points of intervention to the barriers faced by their families in U.S. civil society.

As we attempted to register, inform, and motivate the young Latinos we encountered, we continued to ask questions. What role did their social networks play in either motivating young adults to engage *or* stay away from “politics”? Many of the young, 2nd generation Latino citizens we came across had never registered to vote or had not felt informed enough to cast a vote. In a focus group interview with students, the need to become informed became prevalent:

Maybe if [young Latinos] knew about laws more and the [propositions]...if they were just more informed, they would be like ‘oh my god they’re actually trying to do that? They actually don’t let us do that? It is against the law to do this?’ ...I notice a lot of people don’t care - but the ones that do care... don’t know that much... [If] everybody [was] more informed [young Latinos] would feel like they can make a difference.

Additionally, many of their family members were not able to vote, and those who were, often did not feel well informed. Lisa García Bedolla states, “*non-registered voters are, by and large, Latino, young and foreign born* [emphasis added]; more than two thirds of non-registered eligible voters in California are foreign born”¹ The question then arose, if immigrant parents or uninformed citizens are not well positioned to teach their children how to become informed participants and exercise political power in the US political system, then what other pathways were open to families with mixed-status households? Though we know not all Latinos are eligible to vote, García Bedolla’s findings alluded to the fact that in many Latino households, the attainment of civic skills does not necessarily take place in a typical parent to child pattern, but instead, they can be developed through other interactions, such as from sibling to sibling, child to parents, etc. This led to thinking about how the disenfranchisement of immigrant families could also motivate young adults to encourage and foster a civic culture within their networks, in addition to becoming politically engaged themselves.

Since many of the young adult citizens we attempted to reach were members of families that included non-citizen permanent residents, and/or undocumented individuals, we saw a need for a well-rounded approach to inform about the upcoming election by targeting not only those eligible to vote, but by also engaging those who formed strong ties and had influence over the young adults. Numerous times we encountered non-citizens or undocumented mothers, fathers, siblings, and friends who were not eligible to vote, but who generously provided us with ways to get into contact with their children, siblings, or fellow friends who were citizens and eligible to vote, often saying “*Les puedo dar su teléfono*” (We can give you their phone number) or “*Al ratito vendrá, si quiere pasar de nuevo*” (They’ll be here later in case you’d like to stop by once more). In many of these situations, the social networks surrounding the young adults we encountered, often parents, were politically engaged or at least interested in encouraging those around them to participate, but lacked a pathway to documentation or citizenship for themselves. In the focus group interview, a student canvasser recalled speaking to a woman who could not vote and noticing that her adolescent sons were also home stated,

Since I saw those two guys, I said ‘What about your son, is he 18?’ and she says ‘Yes, he just turned 18’ and she asks him ‘Que si quieres votar?’ and he says ‘Nah!’ and [the mom] just starts laughing...she thought it was funny that he didn’t want to vote. If it [were] my parents, they would have been like ‘Why not? If you can do it, do it...’ I don’t know... it got me really mad.

¹ Lisa García Bedolla and Melissa Michelson, *Mobilizing Inclusion: Transforming the Electorate through Get-Out-the-Vote Campaigns* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 199.

This student's frustration was rooted in the need to have more comprehensive approaches when promoting civic responsibility across young adults and social networks alike. "That's why I tell them [alienated adolescents] 'Don't you think your parents wish they could vote?' You should vote for them." Had the mother of these young men mentioned above been more informed and included in a dialogue about the need for young adults to vote, this situation could have played out much differently. It was also in these types of situations where we realized that while contacting young adults directly was important, we also had to consider approaching those who could influence a young adult to participate: their parents.

Latino Young Adults: Feeling uninformed and unprepared.

While in the Central Valley, we encountered many young citizens who were uninformed about the process of voter registration, as well as the content of the ballot measures, and we met others who felt an overwhelming sense of apathy and/or disengagement towards the electoral process. This proved to be a challenge for our mobilization efforts. While we expected a level of disconnect between young Latinos and the political process; we were not completely sure where that disconnect derived from. Gradually, throughout constant dialogue with the young adults we met, and upon reflecting about our own personal experiences with the political process as young Latinos, we came to a realization. That young Latinos, predominantly first and second generation, had yet to build a strong culture around voting and had yet to reclaim and appropriate their rights to civic participation. Although many initiatives on the November ballot were expected to have disproportionate effects on the Latino community, especially Latino young adults, a politicized consciousness was dormant, and in many situations, Latinos were uninformed about the issues at stake.

In collaborating with our host organizations, we were incorporated into each organization's respective short-term campaign goals of increasing civic engagement in the Central Valley amongst underrepresented communities. The short-term approach initially consisted of primarily registering new voters and updating registrations of previously registered voters², to be followed by the goals of turning out more voters in the November election. Additionally, this process meant that our conversations with these communities while canvassing had to be reduced to about less than 5 minutes, which was not ideal for engaging in dialogue. These conversations resulted in a generally scripted approach, door after door I would repeat, "Hello my name is Lucero and I am a student volunteer registering people to vote..."; while this proved to be an effective method for short-term goals, there was not enough time to explain the importance of voting in the specific community in which we were in or engage in the specificity of

² To read more details about the organizations, see Mariah Melena's essay.

ballot initiatives. A longer-term approach, in contrast, involves focusing on informing and involving the community in order to deepen the discourse around Latino civic participation, especially amongst the social networks surrounding young adults. The instances where this approach took place was often at such events as the community Block-n-Grow event in South Merced, at schools such as the Youth Build presentation, and at the “Carne Asada with the Candidates” event [discussed below]. These spaces were often highly engaging, both for us and the many students and families we talked to, because our goal was not quantity and our goal would be achieved as long as one person or family could walk away confident about their civic rights. Our group understood the time-sensitive importance of mobilizing the Latino community within the short-term strategy, however, the obvious disconnect between Latino social networks and the political process clearly called for a simultaneous commitment to both short-term (election time) and long-term goals, in order to gradually encourage the integration of Latinos in the political process.

While we found diverse degrees of political and civic engagement in Latino communities in this region, we also found that those of lower socioeconomic status were more likely to be disconnected and also alienated from political involvement. In addition, we were able to identify some traditional voter mobilization strategies that did not always successfully reach out to key groups. During door-to-door canvassing efforts, situations occurred where we utilized registered voter rolls to help guide us through neighborhoods, but we had no direct way of contacting potential *new* voters since the rolls only contained information regarding previously registered voters. Targeting groups such as recently turned 18 year old Latinos or low-propensity voters required different approaches, such as creating events within high schools, colleges, and churches. Reaching these potential new voters involved creating new strategies to directly contact young Latinos and the people who have influence in their political participation: *their families and social networks*. As one focus group participant stated: “I think if [young Latinos] would be more encouraged that they could make a difference, cuz I think maybe it’s just disappointing. Like it ‘doesn’t count anyways’... they are not aware of what really is going on, but if they were more informed, if they actually took the initiative to do it and be encouraged to do it then it that would be good.”

The logic behind reaching out to young adults through their social networks in an inclusive manner was to not only to encourage civic participation with young adults, but also to foster open dialogue between parents, children, siblings, and close social ties. As mentioned above, we attempted to bring together families at events, talked to families while canvassing, and tried to keep in mind the social ties surrounding young Latinos. Additionally, we wanted to avoid any alienation or lack of outreach of people unable to participate directly in the electoral

process, but who were open and willing to participate in mobilization efforts. The following are ways we wanted to engage these traditionally disenfranchised groups.

Potential for increased motivation and engagement of young Latinos

a. ¡...Tal vez para la próxima elección! (Maybe for the next election!)

On countless flushed afternoons we would knock on the doors where Latino families dwelled, and often we would encounter people who would express their enthusiasm in our personally contacting them about the importance of voting in this election, but very often they would tell us, “Tal vez para la próxima!” (Maybe next time!) or would lamentably express, “Pues la verdad, no puedo votar, pero si pudiera, lo haría.” (To be honest, I can’t vote, but if I could, I would). It often felt as if we were hitting wall after wall in not knowing how to effectively maintain dialogue with people who (we could sometimes assume) had a brother, sister, son, daughter relative, or friend who *was* eligible to vote. Prior to our mobilization activities, we looked over the Latino demographics in the Central Valley, and it demonstrated a high percentage of non-citizen permanent residents, which was a group that we frequently encountered throughout our efforts. Both our host organizations and our student team understood the importance of stressing the naturalization process for these individuals, however, over the course of our project, our host organizations began to focus more on the short-term efforts involving registering and re-registering voters. Originally there were plans to collaborate with other organizations, such as California Rural Legal Assistance, to coordinate citizenship workshops, but as the elections drew closer, and pressure increased, the focus on bringing legal assistance to low-income permanent residents looking to become citizens was not followed up. This brought some difficulties in our group’s hopes of holistically mobilizing both young adults and their social networks, who were often family members of mixed status.

While the naturalization process would not result in citizenship acquisition for most in time for the November elections, I would argue that the simple act of contacting and engaging parents and family members of young adults to naturalize while simultaneously encouraging young adults to become more informed would create a positive opportunity for those social networks to become civically responsible. The organization’s ultimate decision to divert focus away from naturalization efforts hindered our goals of encouraging U.S. born young adults and naturalized citizens in their social networks to establish habitual political participation since about 28 percent of infrequent voters are naturalized citizens in California.³ Our group understood the need to focus on the short-term efforts because of the upcoming election, but we

³ García Bedolla and Michelson, *Mobilizing Inclusion*, 200.

felt that the election and the pending immigration issue would serve as a drive for the many thousands of permanent residents in the Central Valley to become motivated to participate in future electoral processes. Despite not being able to participate in citizenship workshops, some of the ways the V.I.C.E. group would engage non-citizens was by directing permanent residents to more information regarding citizenship and distributing free citizenship materials [courtesy of NALEO]. We encouraged the naturalization process by stressing the importance of their citizenship as going beyond their own personal enfranchisement. Their step towards citizenship was important to the young adults and undocumented people in their social networks.

We were also moved by the collaborative support that we received from the undocumented Latino community, specifically undocumented youth and their families. The host organizations had made clear their support for comprehensive immigration reform, but in the field, no overarching inclusiveness existed for the undocumented community to participate since the focus was mainly directed towards citizens contributing in the upcoming elections. As a group, we felt that there needed to be ways of involving and motivating the immigrant community in advocating for their own rights through the electoral process. One way we helped to encourage this was by having people take a *pledge* to register others to vote in their immediate social networks. We found this to be a powerful and effective way to engage the undocumented community in mobilizing those around them who were eligible to vote. In addition to pledging, we also canvassed door-to-door in neighborhoods of predominantly Latino families where we would often encounter households where undocumented individuals had citizen children. In these situations, we would witness families directly encouraging their citizen family members to register to vote with us. These were some of the few ways we engaged an often overlooked community, but the key was dialogue. In this next section, I will provide an example of the unique way V.I.C.E. was able to encourage civic involvement among mixed status families, while collaborating with undocumented DREAMers of the Central Valley to bring together the Latino community and local candidates.

b. Stockton's "Carne Asada with the Candidates" event

One of our most memorable events in the Central Valley was our groups' active collaboration with local DREAMers and the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA) in the San Joaquin area. Together, we coordinated a community forum with candidates titled: "Carne Asada with the Candidates". The event had two purposes: first, to bring together local candidates and the Latino community over food, and secondly, to hold a discussion with immigrant youth and their families/guardians about the recently implemented Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals by President Obama, prior to the launching of the official application. The

planning process took about a month and a half, almost our entire time in the Central Valley and it included direct collaboration CHIRLA in contacting local candidates for the event, gathering monetary and food donations, outreach to the community, among other tasks. For most of us, it was the first time we had ever directly contacted local candidates, and the formal process was definitely a learning experience for all. The most rewarding part, however, was seeing it all come together on a warm early morning in Stockton, where we witnessed youth outnumbering adults at the historic Honorific Mexican Commission: La Jamaica Hall. Whether it was setting up tables, making Carne Asada, welcoming candidates and guests...it was all youth-led. Upon the start of the event, there were even last-minute candidates calling us to be included in the event, and it was a great sight to see the candidates going around and talking to members of the community that they probably would not have talked to in a more ‘typical’ campaign event. Upon the announcement of Deferred Action, many families became more involved in informing themselves about the policy that was going to affect their children, and at this event we saw just that. It was a perfect example of how families and social networks of mixed statuses became engaged in the political process —some for the very first time. Beyond the accomplishment of the event, there lies an important and ethical responsibility for organizational campaigns and public officials to be inclusive of their communities in political processes and to adhere to their communities’ needs, especially in communities with high numbers of undocumented residents.



America Valdes and candidate, Moses Zapien talk to a father and his sons during the “Carne Asada with the Candidates” event about community issues.

Take away

What if every region in California with low-voter turnout and low political engagement were to have “Carne Asada with the Candidates” events? How many more such outreach events would have been needed to reach more families in Stanislaus County? What potential does the Latino population have in the political sphere both nationally and locally? If there was any take-away from this summer, it was to think of mobilizing young adults in underrepresented communities in a comprehensive manner that would promote dialogue and change, not solely directed at young adults, but by also engaging their direct social sphere holistically. It is important to see young adults in the Latino community as a group that is progressing and building upon a politically conscious culture that incorporates civic participation, but the road is still a long one ahead. The ability to provide spaces for Latino families to become a part of the political process is something definitely worth investing in. If future mobilization efforts were to wholeheartedly focus strategically on long-term goals for the mixed status families, there would be potential for dramatic changes in the political landscape of immigrant communities, especially in areas such as the Central Valley.

Conclusion: Co-ethnic Conversations

Adrián Félix

On their first day of training in California's Central Valley—a region where voting eligible Latinos, including U.S.-born youth, are chronically under-registered—activist Dolores Huerta shared her lifelong experience with our group of young student canvassers with the following words of wisdom: “Voter registration is not simply about signing people up, it’s about educating voters.” Indeed, voter registration—like get-out-the-vote (GOTV) campaigns—is a contact sport. We deployed a group of UCSC undergraduate Latino students to under-mobilized communities in central California to register and educate low propensity potential voters, including Latino youth like themselves. Simply put, their task was to talk to complete strangers and convince them to register to vote. According to Lisa García Bedolla and Melissa Michelson, a GOTV conversation amounts to an invitation for a targeted voter to join the polity.¹ This requires a script (“rap”)—a narrative-based “sociocultural interaction” capable of changing a target’s cognitive schema so that he/she may take on an identity as a voter. Likewise, voter registration, one step removed in the process of political enfranchisement, also requires a “rap”—a personal invitation to join the circle of registered voters.² In other words, the voter registration “rap” must effectively *register* and compel the potential voter to complete the voter registration form. The idea was that receiving the registration rap from a *co-ethnic*, that is from a fellow young Latina/o, would make the message all the more compelling due to shared ethnic identity between canvasser and registrant. However, as our students’ essays attest, defining and delivering an effective voter registration message was easier said than done.

Our students quickly learned that there are a number of obstacles to registering voters in under-mobilized, difficult-to-contact communities. For one, the relationship between civic organization staff and volunteers and overall campaign logics and pressures impact the quality of conversation between canvassers and registrants. Our students felt that generational tensions with the partner organizations’ staff, who saw themselves as the adult authority figures, interfered with their efforts to target young Latina/o registrants, precisely the potential voters who they had most in common with. Additionally, the short-term campaign pressures to register as many voters as possible, diminished the quality of co-ethnic contact they could

1 Lisa García Bedolla and Melissa Michelson, *Mobilizing Inclusion: Transforming the Electorate through Get-Out-the-Vote Campaigns*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012

2 Yet another step removed in the process of *migrant* political enfranchisement, Plascencia describes naturalization as “entering the circle of citizenship.” See Luis Plascencia, *Disenchanted Citizenship: Mexican Migrants and the Boundaries of Belonging*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012

establish with targeted Latino registrants, as the campaigns quickly became a “numbers game” often at the expense of quality canvassing conversations. While our team was ingenious with their use of social media to establish their autonomy as a group of young volunteers increasing civic engagement, they faced the structural challenges of registering voters in difficult-to-contact and mixed-status Latino communities. The fact that these “low propensity” communities are often ignored by most mobilization campaigns can make them resistant to outsiders attempting to register them to vote. However, where other campaigns saw wasted resources, our students saw “mobilizing opportunities.”³ Among often-overlooked farm worker communities, our students saw the potential for civic synergy and spillover effects between U.S.-born children and immigrant parents, for example. Among convicted felons, our students saw the urgency to provide alienated citizens with information on reinstating their voting rights.

All of these co-ethnic conversations were mediated by the identity of the canvasser—in this case both the *message* and the *messenger* matter. As García Bedolla and Michelson remind us (2012), the canvasser-targeted voter interaction is mediated not only by the canvassing conversation that ensues but also by non-verbal cues that include the identity of the messenger. While the identity of our student volunteers created backlash among unsympathetic non-Latino targets in some cases, these same ethnic cues established empathy and trust among Latino targets. Research in Latino politics shows the enduring effects of co-ethnicity in Latino political behavior, ranging from voter mobilization to candidate preferences.⁴ Latino voters are more likely to be receptive to a mobilization message coming from a fellow Latino/a. Latino voters who live in majority Latino districts are more likely to turnout to vote.⁵ Latino voters are more likely to vote for Latino candidates. Given the enduring salience of co-ethnicity in Latino mobilization, in the context of voter registration and education campaigns, Latino canvassers should emphasize ethnic messaging with Latino registrants. Rather than have one-size-fits-all appeals, the co-ethnic conversation between canvasser and registrant should center on community issues, ethnic efficacy and ethnic empowerment.

This co-ethnic contact is the most promising mobilization tool to overcome the alienation that often makes canvassing in under-mobilized Latino communities so difficult. So long as shared ethnicity continues to be the basis of discrimination and marginalization,

3 This is the title of a forthcoming book by Ricardo Ramírez: *Mobilizing Opportunities: The Evolving Latino Electorate and the Future of American Politics*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press

4 See Matt Barreto, *Ethnic Cues: The Role of Shared Ethnicity in Latino Political Participation*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007

5 Matt Barreto, Gary Segura and Nathan Woods, “The Mobilizing Effect of Majority-Minority Districts on Latino Turnout,” *American Political Science Review* 98 (1) 65-75, 2004

the ethnic model of political participation will continue to be the linchpin of Latino politics and campaigns should be predicated on co-ethnic contact accordingly. These campaigns can potentially have far-reaching and long-lasting effects as voting is both habit-forming and contagious. That is, registering one new voter can have multiplier effects throughout that person's social networks—among other voters in the household, in the neighborhood and in the community. Also, new registrants can solidify their identities as voters at the ballot box, making it more likely that they will participate in future elections. However, this all depends on the effectiveness of the co-ethnic canvassing conversation. That co-ethnic conversation was central to this campaign and reflects exactly how we envision designing and implementing future mobilization efforts: person-to-person, face-to-face, youth-to-youth, Latina/o-to-Latina/o.



The VICE team members with Mi Familia Vota volunteers getting ready to canvass in Modesto.



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