

California on the Ballot

Season Two: Barriers to Voting

Executive Summary



71% of Californians cast ballots in the 2020 election. That’s an extraordinary number—the state’s highest voter turnout since 1952. Yet this high-water mark came with a major asterisk. “Those who turned out to vote remained older, whiter, wealthier, and more educated than the [state’s] adult population at large,” said Alisa

Belinkoff Katz, senior fellow of the UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy and the moderator of [Equity at the Polls: Voter Access in California](#), an event in the second season of California on the Ballot. The newest installment of our popular 2020-21 series sought to explore these persistent demographic gaps at the polls, as well as other imbalances in our state’s electoral processes. What barriers—material, historical, geographical, social—keep Californians from voting? And what can be done to lower these hurdles?

Convened from October 2021 through September 2022 and supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities initiative [A More Perfect Union: America at 250](#), this series comprised six panel discussions over Zoom, each free and open to the public and culminating in a Q&A session with audience members. Experts ranging from professors to activists, journalists to government officials, brought to bear their knowledge of Californian politics, history, and cultures to tell the ever-unfolding story of voting rights—and profound civil wrongs—in the Golden State.

Picking up on season one’s excavations of California’s oft-hidden (and sometimes exceptional) conservatism, panelists revealed time and again that present-day discrepancies in voting can be traced back to the earliest years of Californian electoral law. The state constitution and various other voting prerequisites (from English literacy tests to lengthy residency requirements) explicitly or effectively kept women, racial minorities, immigrants, convicts, and the poor from the polls.

Though these laws have since been amended to extend the franchise to more members of those groups, in practice, structural obstacles continue to suppress the vote among many marginalized demographics. Even the most enthusiastic would-be voters might be stymied by a lack of accessible polling locations (see [Voter Access](#)), of reliable mail and other infrastructure in rural areas ([Voting Rights for Indigenous Populations](#)), or of voting materials in the languages they speak ([Civic Participation and California Immigrants](#)). As indigenous voting rights advocate Jordan James Harvill put it, “when we talk about ‘apathetic’ voters”—a

charge often lazily tossed at Native peoples, whose voter turnout trends low across the country—“I often say that it's not that people don't want to vote; it's that they *can't* vote.”

Panelists from **Indigenous Populations, California Immigrants, and Voter Access** noted that these disparities can be exacerbated in election cycles because campaign spending tends to focus on reaching out and catering to “likely” voters—which disproportionately means *white* voters. So, too, does the wealth gap undergird and worsen electoral inequalities between racial groups (**Immigrants, Voter Access**), particularly in a state where astronomical housing costs shape where and how people live and vote ([Voters on the Move](#)).

In an increasingly divided partisan climate, California's political minorities can also feel they've been ignored by elected officials, as the 2021 event [After the Vote: Recall Elections in California](#) underscored. This may well be one of the factors pushing aggrieved Republicans here to resort to more frequent use of extreme tools like the recall. Perhaps the rising number of recall elections in our state can also be attributed to a populace that the conveniences of the internet age have trained to expect instant gratification, as LA Times journalist Seema Mehta argued on that panel. This remark resonated with a program-wide interest in the ways that technology has variously impaired and improved Californians' ability to vote (**Voter Access, Indigenous Populations**).

This year's events carried forward the previous season's inquiries into what civic engagement looks like beyond the franchise. Californians who can't legally vote (like those currently [incarcerated](#) for felony convictions, or non-citizen **immigrants**) can register others to vote, participate in political discussions in their communities, or get involved in activist movements (**Indigenous Populations**). To this last point, California's long lineage of protest and innovation has given its residents an abiding fondness for speaking truth to power. Panel members emphasized the might of grassroots movements here, from the 2021 attempt to **Recall** Governor Newsom, to the 60% of Californians who voted to re-enfranchise parolees through Prop 17 (**Incarcerated Voters**), to communities who successfully advocated to stay together in voting districts during the 2020 statewide redistricting process (**Voters on the Move**).

Panelists consistently expressed confidence that Californians' populist passion for shaping our democracy spells a brighter future for electoral rights here (**Indigenous Populations, Voter Access, California Immigrants**). “The last five or six years have been really powerful here in California” for criminal justice reform, said Romarilyn Ralston. As Program Director of Project Rebound at California State University Fullerton, Ralston helps formerly incarcerated people pursue college degrees after they've been released from prison. Indeed, many speakers named education as the crucial first link in the chain of becoming an informed and active citizen (**Indigenous Populations, Incarcerated Voters**). Recalling her own experience teaching local history and law at Bakersfield College, **Voter Access** panelist Lori Pesante described watching students gain a lifelong excitement for civics because they'd finally been helped to see that political engagement could intimately affect their lives and

communities. “This is why humanities work ... is so profoundly important,” she said, a note that was also sounded in **California Immigrants** and **Incarcerated Voters**. “Because every single bit is one brick that builds the foundation for all of us to stand on together.”

After the Vote: Recall Elections in California

The second season of California on the Ballot opened upon a topic that shook the state with all the force of an earthquake in 2021: recall elections. Convened on the one-month anniversary of the vote on whether Governor Gavin Newsom should be removed from office, the October 15, 2021 panel discussion considered the reasons behind Californians’ long-standing love affair with the recall as voter action. Dan Schnur, Professor at UC Berkeley, Pepperdine, and the University of Southern California, moderated a conversation between two political journalists: Seema Mehta of the LA Times and Carla Marinucci of Politico.

The six recall efforts that Newsom has faced thus far over the course of his term were both typical and atypical of his office’s history, the trio of speakers agreed. On the one hand, every single California governor in recent decades has faced some form of recall challenge. But these attempts virtually never gain the signatures necessary to make it onto the ballot (the only exceptions being Newsom in 2021 and Gray Davis in 2003). Furthermore, Newsom initially came to office in a landslide, winning two thirds of the vote in 2018. Against those odds, what won Newsom’s adversaries their day in the sun and on the ballot?

COVID-19 was a major piece of the puzzle here (as it was with recent redistricting efforts in California, according to **Voters on the Move**). The many miseries of the global pandemic generated a “perfect storm” of voter anger in search of a target, said Mehta. Small missteps—like Newsom’s choice to dine at the lush restaurant French Laundry after cautioning his constituents to stay home—went viral among an electorate stuck indoors and glued to their phones. Plus, the public health emergency prompted courts to grant recall proponents extra time to gather signatures.

Ironically, although COVID got Newsom’s head onto the recall chopping-block to begin with, it was also the pandemic that eventually saved him from expulsion. When conservative Larry Elder entered the race as Newsom’s potential replacement, expressing skepticism about safety measures around the deadly virus, voters suddenly saw the incumbent as the safer, saner, lesser of two evils. “[Newsom’s] message in the final months of the campaign was really just, ‘If you elect these other people, people are going to die,’” Mehta summed up. But although he eventually defeated his would-be ousters, Newsom did not emerge unscathed. The recall sucked up Newsom’s time, the public’s attention—and his supporters’ money, to the tune of millions that could have been spent on other Democratic races instead.

To understand why such a politically devastating weapon is made available to Californians to begin with, we must go back to the early twentieth century, when the recall was born here. Hiram Johnson—also a main character in [California on the Ballot’s Season 1 event on Ballot](#)

Initiatives—won the governorship on the populist promise that he would take a stand against the special interests that then dominated the state government (such as railroad profiteers). Along with ballot initiatives and referendums, the recall was the third prong of Johnson’s plan for putting power directly into hands of the people. However, “for the better part of almost a century, these [tools] were fairly ignored Generally the thought of the public was, ‘Don’t break glass unless [it’s an] emergency,’” noted Schnur. But “in recent years ... we’ve begun to break that glass more and more frequently,” with the number of recall elections noticeably increasing here. This holds true across the ideological spectrum and across political position: from District Attorneys in Los Angeles to school board members in San Francisco, no official seems safe from the threat of ejection.

The reasons for this uptick reach beyond COVID. Mehta suggested that the conveniences of modern technology have conditioned us to expect instant gratification, whether it’s a swiftly arriving Amazon package or a swiftly booted political official. But the nation’s increasingly polarized political landscape plays a role, too. In previous decades, a voter whose candidate(s) of choice did not prevail at the ballot box could at least hope that they might see some cross-aisle concessions in the term ahead. But in today’s scorched-earth climate, such compromises often seem unlikely. So, the politically passionate whose favorites have lost an election might feel that recalls are their only chance to hold the opposition’s elected officials accountable. Especially so in an “overwhelmingly blue” state like California, where Republicans often feel unheard, said Marinucci.

This “new kind of activism,” as Marinucci termed it, that exercises itself through recalls doesn’t seem to be going anywhere. Granted, Californians love to gripe about our state’s never-ending circus of frequent and confusing recalls and ballot initiatives, and polls indicate that many of us want to make it harder to launch a recall (by raising the number of signatures required, by restricting recalls only to cases of criminal activity, etc.). However, “woe to that person who tries to take [the recall option] away,” mused Schnur. “[Californians] might not like [the experience], but they relish having that authority if and when they need it.”

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