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Who Votes in Los Angeles City Elections?

A REPORT FROM PBI'S STATE OF THE CITY SERIES

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THE EDMUND G. "PAT" BROWN INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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The Pat Brown Institute for Public Affairs was established at Cal State Los Angeles in 1987. The PBI is a nonpartisan, applied public policy center dedicated to the quest for social justice and equality of opportunity, enlightened civic engagement, and an enhanced quality of life for all Californians. It sustains the vision and legacy of the former governor through convening public policy forums, engaging multi-sector stakeholders and diverse communities, and conducting timely policy research and community-driven initiatives. To learn more about the Institute, see www.patbrowninstitute.org

The PBI has published books, working papers, and reports exploring policy issues in local, county, regional, and state arenas. One of the Institute's ongoing features has been the State of the City Report.

This year, with the generous support of JP Morgan Chase & Company, we looked at voting in the City of Los Angeles. Low voter turnout in the 2013 Los Angeles mayoral election generated considerable debate about the condition of local democracy. A vibrant discussion has emerged about what can be done to turn the situation around. This PBI report finds a long term decline in voting in mayoral elections, compared to steady participation in the quadrennial presidential election.

We also found that there is a deep generational change happening in the Los Angeles electorate. Perhaps more slowly than many had anticipated, but nonetheless with a steady air of inevitability, Los Angeles voters are becoming more diverse and more Democratic. Homeowners and older voters continue to dominate the local electorate far beyond their share of the population or even of those eligible to vote. Measures of participation other than voting continue to over-represent these populations by comparison to the "new" electorate that will someday come fully into its own.

While some proposed reforms may potentially improve the level and diversity of local participation (including changing election dates and increasing the size of the city council), the bigger problem is one of connection and information. To what extent can city hall matter to the lives of the people of the city, and how can a wider range of residents come to experience that connection? How can information about local government be disseminated widely and effectively so that people understand the access points that will allow their voices to be heard? More than 90 percent of the city's youth are native born; as they turn 18, they will be eligible to vote. Will we be ready to meet them as they prepare for this crucial step, one that often sets a lifetime of voting in motion?

We are hopeful that this report will add to the current debate and keep the focus on widening the circle of those who participate in local government and thereby lead to a more inclusive public policy.

With best regards,



Raphael Sonenshein,
Executive Director

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JP Morgan Chase & Company.

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Who Votes in Los Angeles City Elections?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Findings:

- Low turnout in the 2013 Los Angeles mayoral election was the culmination of a steady decline in voter participation in mayoral races since the titanic battles between Tom Bradley and Sam Yorty in 1969 and 1973.
- Declining turnout in mayoral races contrasts with steady turnout among Los Angeles city voters in presidential elections.
- The decline between presidential and mayoral voting is greatest among younger voters and Latinos. With the exception of the 2005 mayoral election that resulted in Antonio Villaraigosa's victory, the Latino share of the actual vote tends to be lower than its share of voter registration.
- Older voters and homeowners are disproportionately represented in mayoral voting.
- Latinos and Asian Americans have significantly increased their impact on local elections over the past 20 years.
- The city electorate has become far more Democratic than it was 20 years ago. Of those who actually voted, the Democratic margin over Republicans has gone from 27% in 1993 to 47% in 2013.
- Beyond voting, interest and participation in local politics and government vary according to race and ethnicity, and education. Latinos, youth, and those without a college degree are significantly less likely to be interested and to participate in ways other than voting.
- Regardless of election structure reforms, the Los Angeles electorate is on a path to major change. Long term demographic change means that the city's electorate will become younger, more Latino, more Asian American, and more Democratic. Of those under the age of 18 in 2008, more than 90 percent were born in the United States, and will be eligible to vote.
- Some structural changes, such as changing election dates, or increasing the size of the city council, may improve voter turnout.
- A more representative Los Angeles city electorate, however, will require not only structural changes but also making city government more widely engaging to a more diverse community, energetic civic education and increasing local media coverage of city hall and the city's neighborhoods.

INTRODUCTION

Low turnout in the 2013 Los Angeles mayoral election has drawn attention to the issue of lagging participation. Various reforms are being proposed, including structural changes such as different election dates and voting rules.

In 2014, the Los Angeles city council and Mayor Eric Garcetti appointed a Municipal Elections Reform Commission "to determine the best manner in which to improve and enhance voter participation and civic engagement with respect to the City's electoral process…"

The Pat Brown Institute (PBI) at Cal State L.A. devotes this report, part of PBI's State of the City series, to exploring who participates and who does not in Los Angeles city elections and how demographic and generational changes are altering the composition of the local electorate. We place our findings in the historical context of previous Los Angeles city elections. We further explore how the future of the Los Angeles electorate may look as generational and ethnic changes continue to work their ways through the system.

Finally, we speculate on the impact some reforms might have on participation in Los Angeles. Much more research needs to be done on each possible reform before reaching firm conclusions about their impacts.

The data for this study include:

1) An analysis of voter rolls conducted by Political Data, Inc. of voting behavior within Los Angeles City in federal, state, and local elections between 2002 and 2013
2) Two polls of city voters conducted by PBI, as well as exit polls by the *Los Angeles Times* (1993-2005) and by Loyola Marymount University's Center for the Study of Los Angeles in 2009 and 2013
3) United States Census data
4) Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder election returns
5) Materials from the City Archives and Records Center of the Los Angeles City Clerk's Office

The City of Los Angeles holds municipal elections in odd-numbered years. Mayoral elections, usually the most lively of these contests, are held in the spring following American presidential elections. With citywide elected officials limited to two four-year terms, open seats for the mayor's office should generate considerable public interest.

In March and May 2013, competitive campaigns offered Los Angeles voters choices in three citywide offices and a number of city council races. After the primary election, two major candidates, Eric Garcetti and Wendy Greuel, faced off for mayor. There were also runoffs for the other two citywide offices, city attorney and controller.

In spite of these spirited races for citywide seats, voter turnout was decidedly low (Table 1). In the March 5th primary, 21% of voters participated. In the May 21 runoff, only 23% of registered voters cast votes. Both were record lows for open-seat mayoral elections in the city of Los Angeles.[1]

Table 1.

Voter Turnout: Los Angeles 2013*

	November 2012 General	March 5 Primary	May 21 Runoff
Registered Voters	1,699,865	1,817,107	1,797,318
Total Ballots Cast	1,201,685	377,881	419,592
Voter Turnout	71%	21%	23%

**Source: Los Angeles City Clerk, certified final bulletins*

TURNOUT IN MODERN TIMES

Voter turnout in modern Los Angeles elections with contested mayoral races can be divided into two eras: before and after the historic battles between Tom Bradley and Sam Yorty when the racial and ideological direction of the city was determined (Table 2).

In 1961, Sam Yorty upset incumbent mayor Norris Poulson and nearly half of the city's voters turned out. Yorty's rise marked a significant change in Los Angeles politics, as the traditional political and business elites opposed him.[2] Yorty's easy re-election in 1965 drew an even higher proportion of registered voters to the polls, with 59% turnout.

In 1969, a city electorate deeply divided over race and ideology generated a massive turnout of 76%, as Yorty defeated his challenger Bradley. When Bradley won their rematch four years later, the turnout was 64%.[3]

With City Hall's political transformation well underway, Bradley's four re-elections were quiet affairs, and turnout fell, ranging from 34% in 1977 to 24% in 1989. A contested race between Republican businessman Richard Riordan and liberal city councilmember Michael Woo in 1993 saw turnout rise to 45%. But even the historic 2005 election of Antonio Villaraigosa as the first Latino mayor in more than century generated only a 34% turnout.

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[1] New York City, with its history of high political participation, did not fare much better. In its closely contested mayoral race in 2013, the turnout was below 30 percent.

[2] Charles G. Mayo, 1964. The 1961 Mayoralty Election in Los Angeles: The Political Party in a Nonpartisan Election. *Western Political Quarterly* 17: 325-27.

[3] Raphael J. Sonenshein, 1993. *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

4 Who Votes in Los Angeles City Elections?

Over the last half century, Los Angeles has gone from fairly strong voter turnout to a massive surge in highly contested races to a slow decline into generally low voter participation. As Table 2 and Figure 1 indicate, turnout in presidential elections has remained steady during this same period.

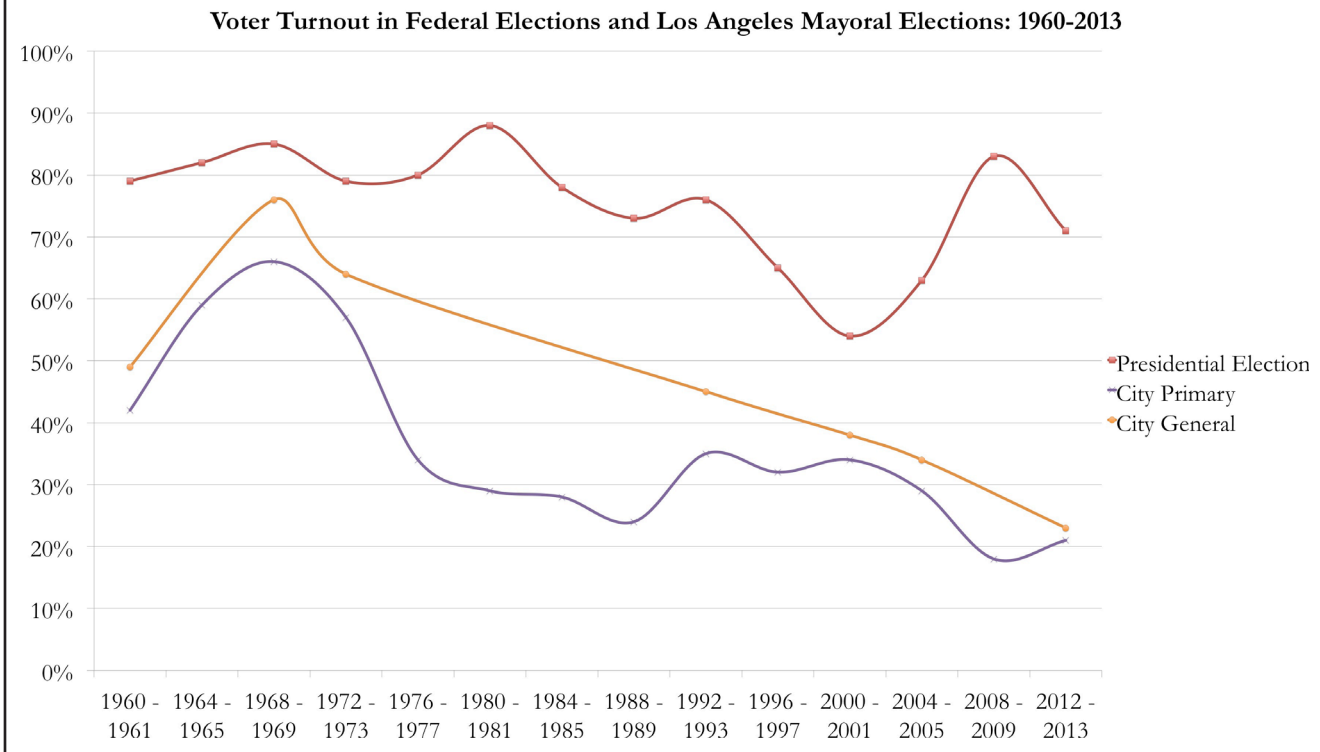
Table 2.

Voter Turnout in Federal Elections and Los Angeles Mayoral Races: 1960 - 2013

	Turnout		
Election Cycle	Presidential Election	City Primary	City General
1960 - 1961	79%	42%	49%
1964 - 1965	82%	59%	*
1968 - 1969	85%	66%	76%
1972 - 1973	79%	57%	64%
1976 - 1977	80%	34%	*
1980 - 1981	88%	29%	*
1984 - 1985	78%	28%	*
1988 - 1989	73%	24%	*
1992 - 1993	76%	35%	45%
1996 - 1997	65%	32%	*
2000 - 2001	54%	34%	38%
2004 - 2005	63%	29%	34%
2008 - 2009	83%	18%	*
2012 - 2013	71%	21%	23%

** No Mayoral Runoff*

Figure 1.



WHO VOTES?

Based on surveys of 904 registered voters by the Pat Brown Institute in May and 501 registered voters in September of 2013, Table 3 looks at racial, ethnic, and partisan groups in the electorate. Table 5 indicates the share of voter registration for Latinos and Asian-Americans based on an analysis of voter rolls by Political Data, Inc. We focus on these groups because as the main immigrant communities in the City, their transformation into voting participants holds the greatest potential for changing the structure of the city's electorate.

Table 3.

A Portrait of Registered Voters: Los Angeles 2013

	PBI Poll May 2013	PBI Poll Sept. 2013
Race		
API	10%	7%
Black	12%	9%
Latino	29%	23%
White	42%	53%
Party		
Democratic	53%	55%
Republican	13%	13%
Other	22%	28%

Table 4.

City of Los Angeles: Share of Voter Turnout by Ethnicity*

	Share of Voter Turnout		
	API	Latino	White
2005 Primary	7%	19%	43%
2005 General	7%	23%	48%
2009 Primary	8%	14%	38%
2013 Primary	8%	23%	NA
2013 General	8%	24%	NA

**Source: Political Data, Inc.*

Figure 4 indicates that the level of Latino participation tends to be lower than its share of registration. However, Asian Americans sometimes over-perform and at other times under-perform relative to their share of registration. (Figure 2) There is also a clear inverse relationship between Latino and white vote shares as shown in Figure 3. In elections that draw large Latino participation, such as the 2005 runoff election, the white share is correspondingly lower.

Who votes in presidential elections seems to differ considerably from who votes in city elections. The even-numbered voter participation share is considerably higher for Latinos and younger voters (see Table 6). However, African-Americans have a greater relative impact on the city races than in the state and national elections. API voters show no significant difference. The greatest gap is among younger voters who represent three times their share of the city vote when an even-numbered election comes around.

Tables 6 and 7 indicate that in city elections:

- Older voters far outweigh younger voters, by a more than three to one margin.
- Homeowners outvote renters by a large margin in a city where the majority of residents are renters.

Table 5.

Share of Votes Cast by Groups in Los Angeles

	November 2012 General	March 5 Primary	May 21 Runoff
Race*			
API	6%	7%	6%
Black	11%	12%	12%
Latino	27%	23%	24%
White	49%	55%	54%
Age**			
18-29	18%	5%	6%
65+	21%	38%	36%

**Source: LMU Exit Poll*
***Source: Political Data, Inc.*

Table 6.

Homeowners vs. Renters in the City of Los Angeles

	Homeowners	Renters		US Census Homeowners	US Census Renters
1993*	56%	29%			
1997*	58%	29%			
			2000	37%	56%
2001*	68%	32%			
2005*	64%	31%			
			2010	38%	62%
2013 Primary**	67%	31%			
2013 General**	59%	41%			

**Source: Los Angeles Times Exit Poll*
***Source: LMU Exit Poll*

REGISTRATION AND VOTE SHARES

Figure 2.

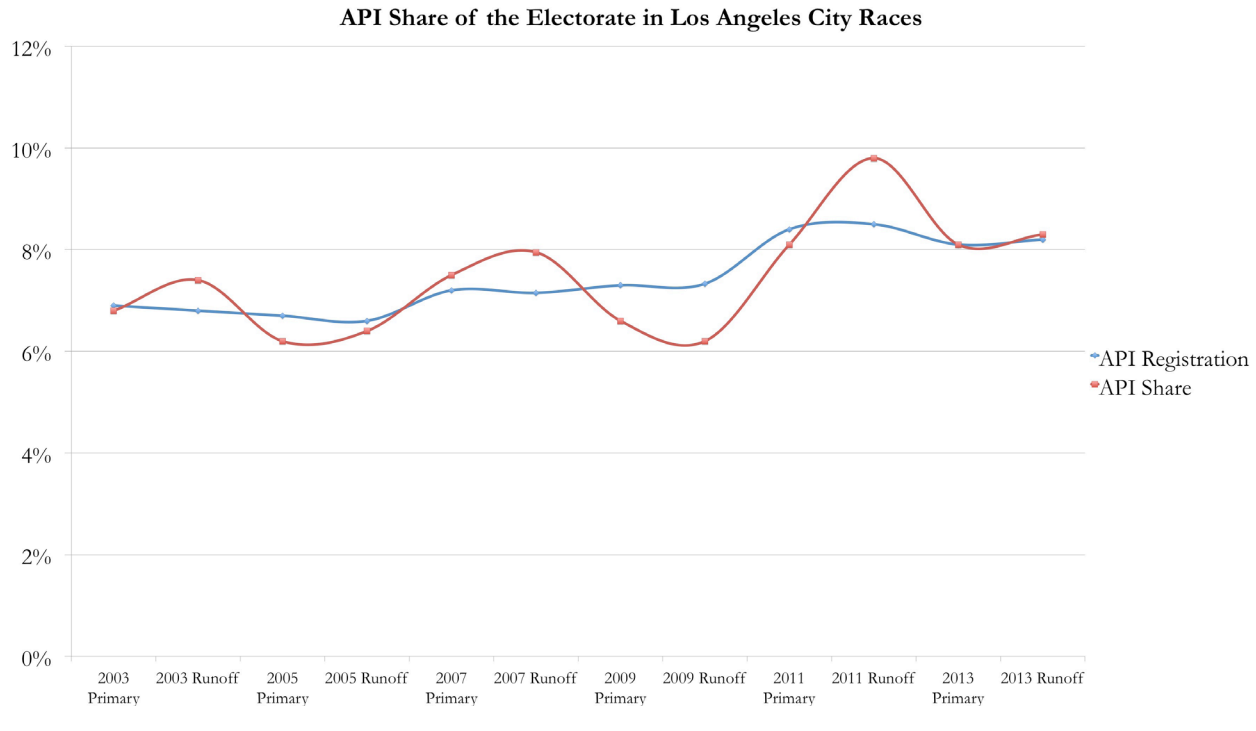


Figure 3.

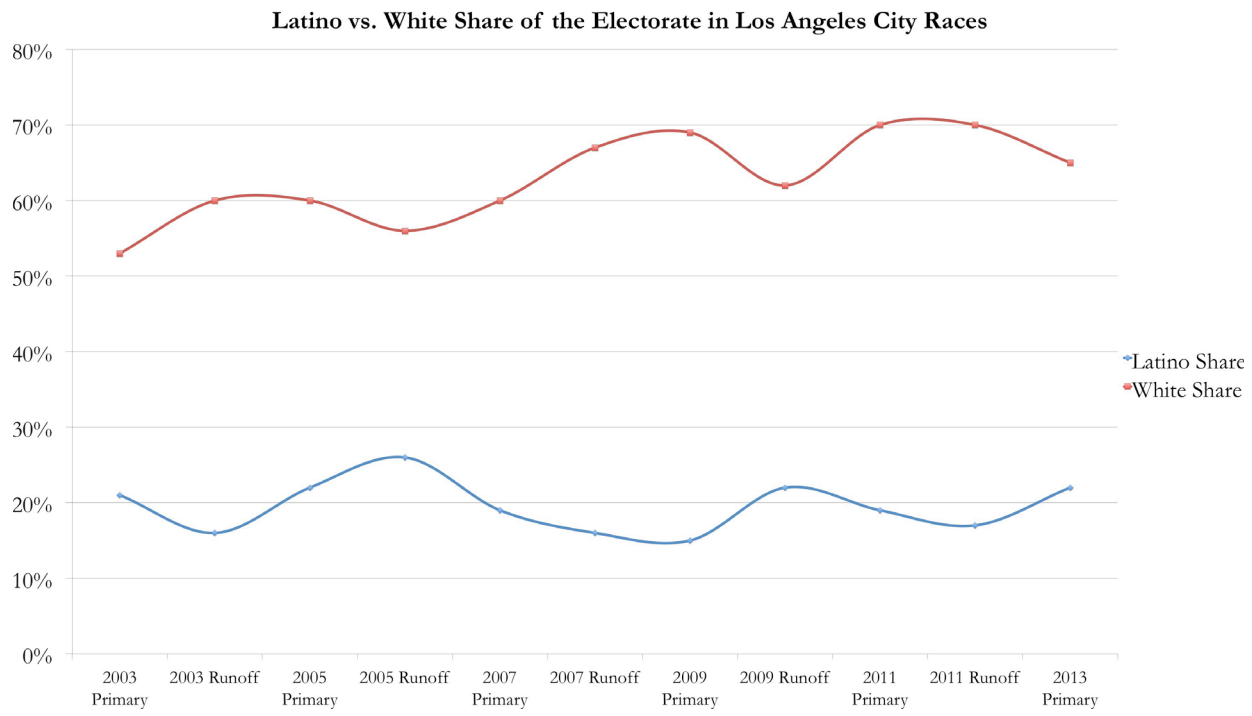
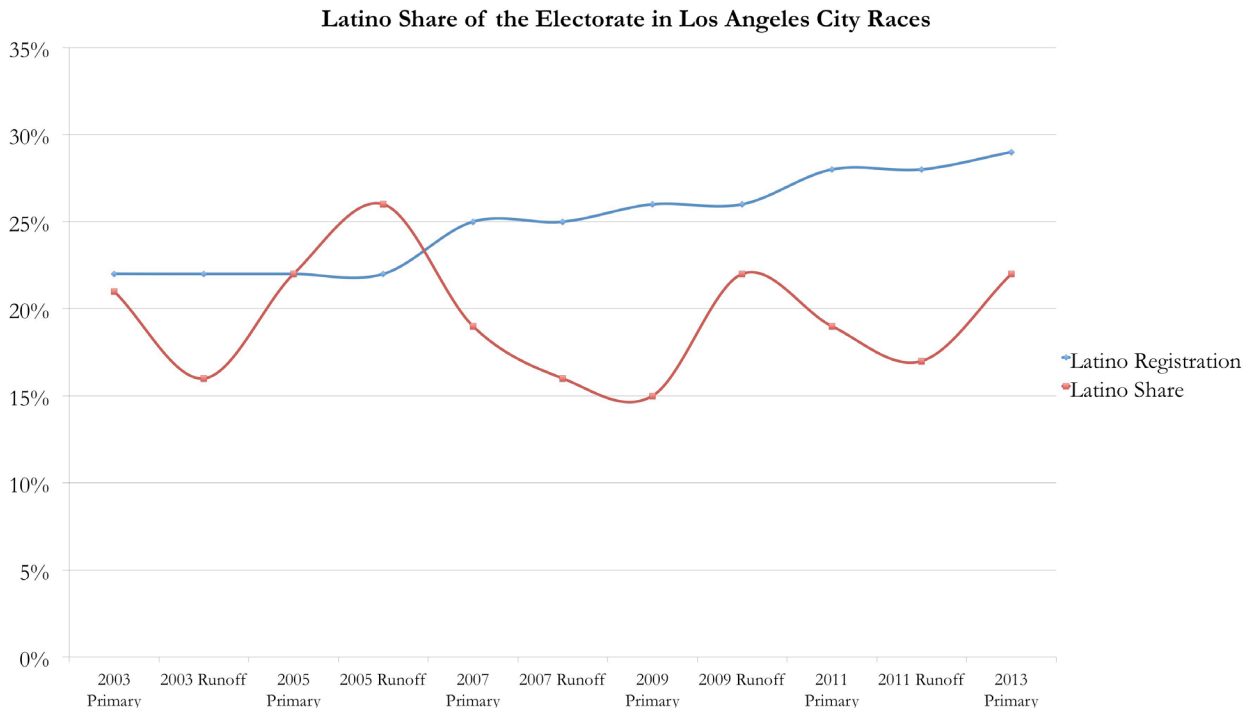


Figure 4.



THE CHANGING ELECTORATE

Over the course of two decades, the Los Angeles electorate has become more strongly Democratic, and less Republican. Figure 5 illustrates the changing party registration of Los Angeles city voters. Among those who voted in city elections, a 27-point Democratic edge in 1993 expanded to a 47% margin in 2013. The turning point in the Democratic surge seems to fall in the 2001 mayoral race when a competitive Latino candidate lost in a runoff election.

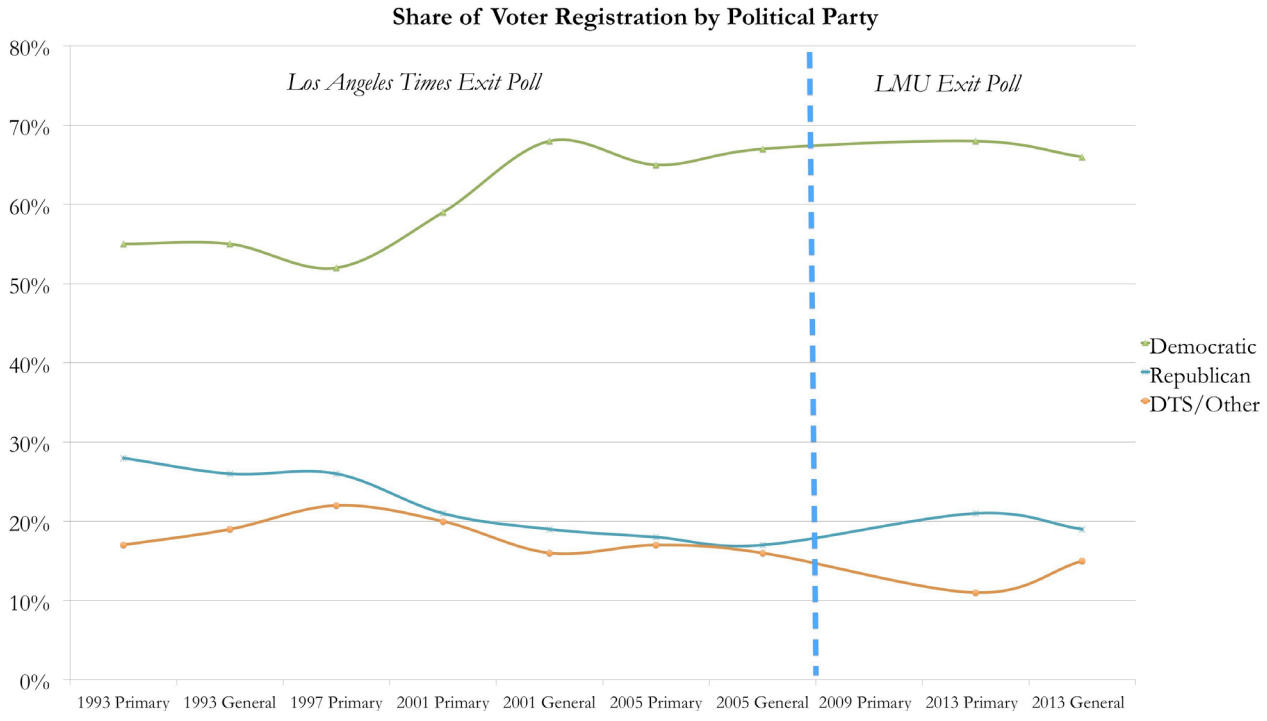
Table 7.

Share of Actual Voters by Political Party

	Democratic	Republican	DTS/Other
1993 Primary*	55%	28%	17%
1993 General*	55%	26%	19%
1997 Primary*	52%	26%	22%
2001 Primary*	59%	21%	20%
2001 General*	68%	19%	16%
2005 Primary*	65%	18%	17%
2005 General*	67%	17%	16%
2009 Primary**	--	--	--
2013 Primary**	68%	21%	11%
2013 General**	66%	19%	15%

**Source: Los Angeles Times Exit Poll*
***Source: LMU Exit Poll*

Figure 5.



While growing Latino and Asian-American populations have driven the rise of Democratic shares, White voters, who represent a shrinking share of the population, comprise the core of Republican voters in the city. As we consider how to increase voter participation among younger Angelenos, renters, those without college education, and communities of color, we examine some underlying variables that may affect behavior. A September 2013 PBI poll of registered voters found significant differences in how interested groups are in local politics and government, and where they get their information.

More than two thirds of voters report that they are very or somewhat interested in local politics and government.[4] Whites and African Americans express the most interest, with Latinos showing the least (84 percent, 79 percent, and 58 percent respectively). Those with college degrees have greater interest than those with no college education (76 percent and 62 percent), while voters who are less than 45 years old are only half as likely to be "very interested" in city politics. Homeowners report significantly greater interest than renters.

Voters differ in where they get news about local politics and government. The data shows the top choice to be local television news (43 percent), considerably more than the 16 percent whose main source of information is newspapers. Homeowners are more than twice as likely to rely on newspapers as renters. Education also affects where people search for news. Thirty-five percent of those with college degrees rely primarily on local television news compared to 59 percent of those with no college education. Blogs and websites are not far behind newspapers (14 percent). The age gap is wide, with 29 percent of younger voters picking blogs and websites, compared to only three percent of older voters.

[4] It is perfectly possible that voters state greater interest in public affairs than actually exists. On the other hand, there is no reason to believe accurate-self reports are unevenly distributed; as a result, we believe that we can infer differences of political interest among the city's groups.

Fifteen percent of voters report participating in a neighborhood council, with those over the age of 45 more than twice as likely to participate as younger voters. Eighteen percent of voters have attended a public meeting, although those voters with a college degree are much more likely (26 percent) than those with no college education (seven percent). African Americans (23 percent) and whites (22 percent) were more likely than Latinos (13 percent) to have attended a public meeting.

A common form of political activity by Los Angeles voters is talking about local politics and government with family and friends (62 percent). Among those with a college degree, 69 percent have had such conversations, compared to 49 percent with no college education. Forty-one percent have volunteered in a community activity, and 61 percent have made a financial contribution to a community activity.[5]

While we often focus on low voter turnout, we also need to help create a more representative electorate, by increasing the participation of those groups less active in the electorate. If Los Angeles government is going to more accurately represent the community, efforts will need to be made to encourage interest and participation among younger voters, Latinos, Asian Americans, African Americans, renters, and those without college education.

Table 8.

Los Angeles Voter Profiles, PBI 2013 Poll

	Race			Education			Age	
	Black	Latino	White	HS or Less	Some College	College	18 - 44	45+
Interest in Local Politics								
Interested	79%	58%	84%	62%	71%	76%	63%	76%
Not Interested	20%	42%	16%	38%	29%	23%	37%	24%
Main Source of Local News								
Newspapers	8%	11%	22%	9%	13%	25%	11%	21%
Local TV News	51%	51%	34%	59%	34%	35%	34%	51%
Blogs & Websites	16%	16%	11%	7%	25%	14%	29%	3%
Somewhere Else	19%	20%	32%	20%	27%	26%	26%	22%
Participated in Neighborhood Council								
Yes	13%	12%	18%	10%	19%	15%	8%	19%
No	87%	87%	82%	89%	81%	83%	92%	79%
Conversations About Local Politics								
Yes	64%	51%	69%	49%	66%	69%	57%	64%
No	36%	49%	30%	51%	34%	30%	42%	36%

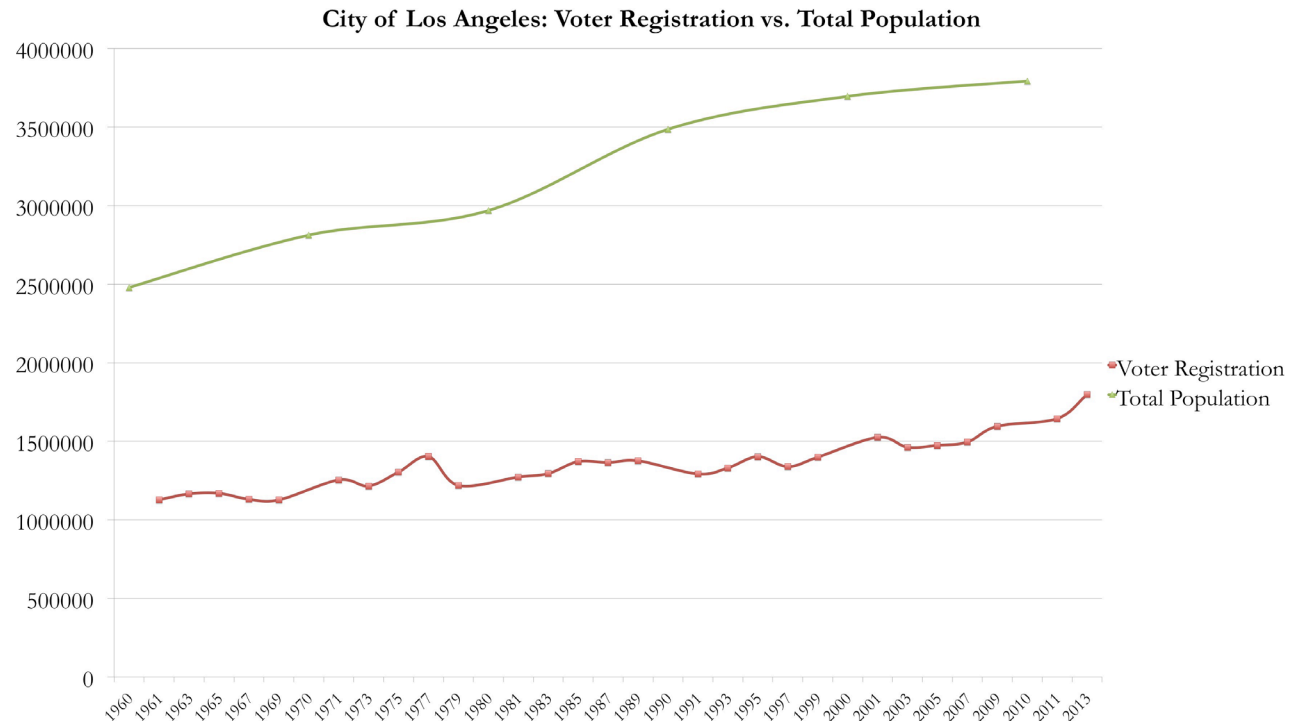
[5] This material is drawn verbatim from the Pat Brown Institute's report on its September 2013 poll of Los Angeles registered voters. There were not enough Asian Pacific Islander (API) voters for scientific analysis.

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS

Over the past 40 years, there has been a major change in the demographics of the City of Los Angeles. A study of immigration to Los Angeles city conducted for the Pat Brown Institute in 2010 showed that the foreign born share of the city's population rose dramatically from 14.6% in 1970 to 38.4% in 1990.[6] This period marked the great surge of immigration to Los Angeles.

While immigration has contributed to the maintenance and expansion of the population of LA, delays caused by the citizenship process and political incorporation underlie the phenomenon observed in Figure 6. As illustrated in this graph, while the population of the City of Los Angeles has grown rapidly over the last two decades, voter

Figure 6.



registration has grown much more slowly. By 2013, the gap between population and registration had become the largest in modern times.

Although the number of registered voters has not increased much over the last 30 years, the population increased by more than a million people. Immigration since the 1980s augmented the population without raising the net overall numbers of eligible voters. Since a significant portion of the population increase in recent decades has been among immigrant communities (with higher than average rates of non-citizenship) the gap between the overall population and those who are eligible to participate has increased as well.

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[6] Dowell Myers, Janna Goldberg, Sarah Mawhorter, and Seong Hee Min. "Immigrants and the New Maturity of Los Angeles". In Ali Modarres, editor, Los Angeles 2010: State of the City. Pat Brown Institute, 2010: pp. 12-27.

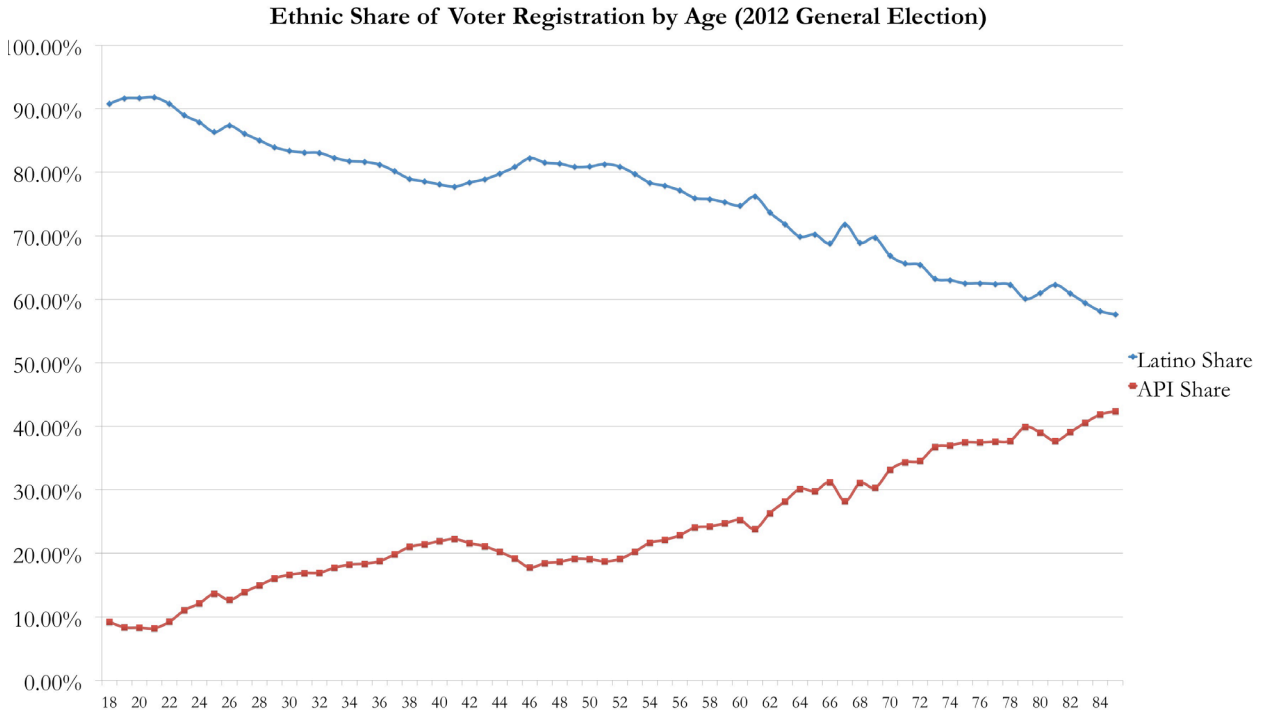
However, there was a slowing of the rate of increase in immigration after 1990. Between 1990 and 2009, the foreign born share of the population only increased to 39.7%. There was a "settling in" of the foreign born community. The ratio of long-settled immigrants to new immigrants grew dramatically. Growing English proficiency and increased rates of homeownership further indicated settling.[7]

Demographic change translates slowly into political change in part because of the factor of age. Figure 7 shows voter registration by age for Latinos and Asian Americans, from 2002 to 2013. As this Figure illustrates, the Latino share of registration is very high amongst younger voters; the opposite holds true for Asian Americans of the same age group. As age begins to increase, however, there is a clear shift in voter demographics, with the number of Asian American voters increasing and the number of Latinos steadily decreasing.

Examining age by racial and ethnic group shows that the youngest group by far is Latinos. As this cohort ages, it will likely bolster the voter share of the Latino community. And as younger Asian Americans come of age and enjoy the benefits of citizenship, their share of younger voters should increase as well.

As the immigrant community settles more deeply into Los Angeles, a generational shift has occurred with major political implications. The PBI study found that in 2008, 92.4% of all children under the age of 18 in Los Angeles were native born, and therefore automatically citizens of the United States. When young people in contemporary Los Angeles turn 18, they are nearly all going to be able to register to vote.[8]

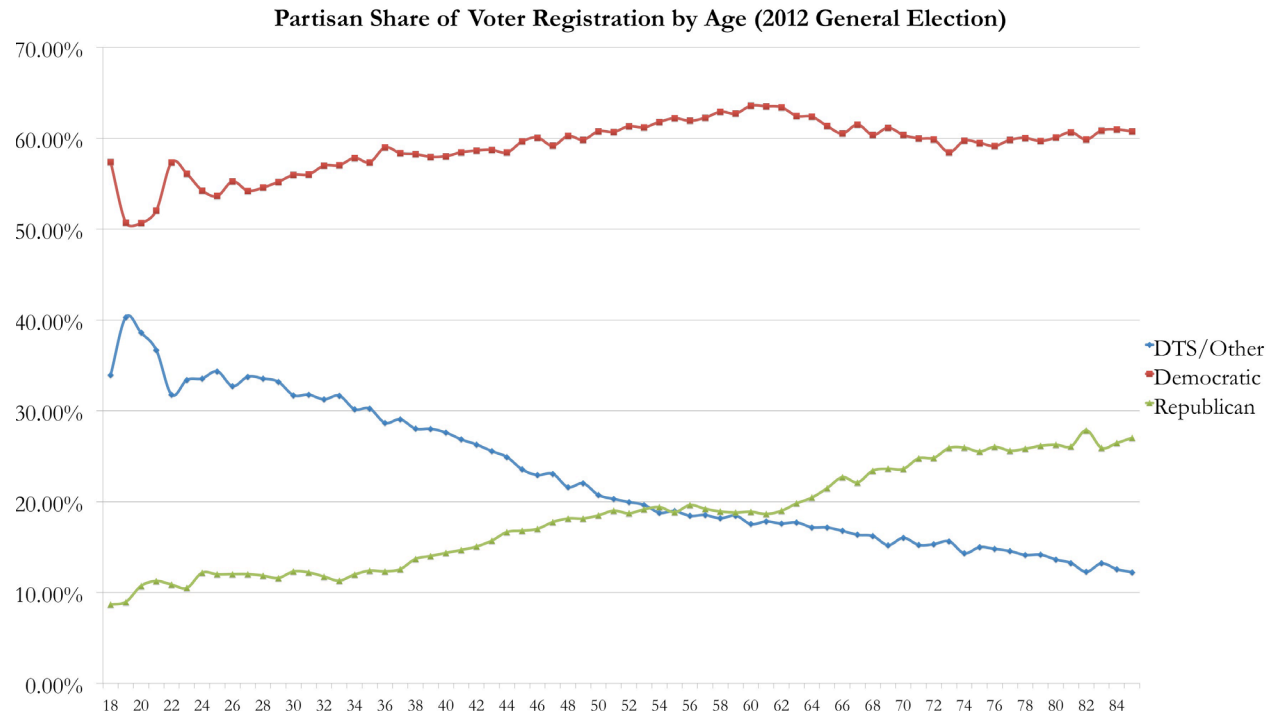
Figure 7.



[7] Myers et. al

[8] Ibid

Figure 8.



OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Los Angeles city elections do not draw large numbers of voters to the polls. A very competitive election in 2013 generated one of the lowest voter turnouts in Los Angeles history. There has been a long-term decline in voting in Los Angeles in the years following the historic election of Tom Bradley in 1973. By contrast, voter turnout in presidential elections in Los Angeles has been relatively stable.

The Los Angeles electorate is far from a reflection of the overall population. And in city elections, the voting community is even narrower than in presidential elections. Asian Americans, Latinos, the young, and renters register and vote at lesser percentages of their population, while whites, older voters, and homeowners have a more pronounced role.

The Los Angeles city electorate is in constant flux, as young citizens turn 18, non-citizens obtain citizenship, and older voters leave the electorate. Data from 2013 represent a snapshot in time of a longer process that will create a different electorate in coming decades. The trend toward a more nonwhite, younger, and more Democratic electorate is likely to accelerate as the next generation of young Angelenos reach voting age.

STRUCTURAL REFORM

Proposals have been made to move local elections to an even-numbered calendar. Overall turnout would certainly be higher than in current municipal elections. It is possible that a more diverse electorate would also result from that change. However, more research would have to be conducted to explore "ballot fatigue" especially among those voters already less likely to vote. In addition, the impact of even numbered year voting will obviously be smaller in non-presidential years, which have experienced a decline over the decades in voter turnout.[9]

Changing election dates is not the only structural alternative that could increase participation. For example, increasing the size of the city council to 21 members would offer more opportunities for groups to gain representation, which in turn could increase interest and participation. While this proposal and a companion one for 25 members failed to win voter approval by a wide margin in 1999, the local electorate has changed dramatically in the interim.

CIVIC REFORM

PBI polling also indicates that levels of interest vary considerably within the Los Angeles community. City elections may not address issues that matter as much to working class residents, to young people, and to communities of color compared to presidential elections. To the extent that city government addresses issues that matter for all communities, greater turnout will likely result.

Finally, any plan to increase voter participation and civic participation must incorporate substantial civic education about Los Angeles city government. While those who are already active in city politics and government are undoubtedly knowledgeable about City Hall, comparable levels of information are unlikely to be found in the rest of the community. Knowledge often underlies the confidence to participate, and helps create a sense of political efficacy.

[9] In the 2014 statewide primary, turnout in L.A. County was extremely low.