

# Youth-led Civic Engagement and the Growing Electorate: Findings from the Central Valley Freedom Summer Participatory Action Research Project

By Dr. Veronica Terriquez, Randy Villegas, and Roxanna Villalobos  
University of California, Santa Cruz

California's Central Valley<sup>1</sup> has recently seen a rise in youths' political activism. Between the 2014 and 2018 midterm elections, the number of young adults aged 18-24 who voted jumped from 32,414 to 85,007, an impressive 262% increase. While this upswing in turnout was certainly a response to the national political climate, youth members of community-based organizations in this largely agricultural region also played a central role in mobilizing voters. Their grassroots work was supported and documented by student leaders from the Central Valley Freedom Summer (CVFS) Participatory Action Research Project. CVFS drew inspiration from the 1964 Freedom Summer effort, in which university students joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in registering voters in rural Mississippi. As part of a university-community partnership, CVFS trained students at UC Santa Cruz and UC Merced to conduct research and work alongside community-based organizations. Its goal was to engage young people of color in improving their communities through electoral engagement and grassroots organizing.

Made possible through institutional support from UC Santa Cruz and UC Merced, the Central Valley Freedom Summer Participatory Action Research Project received generous financial support from the Irvine Foundation, The California Endowment, the Sierra Foundation, and individual donors.



Central Valley Freedom Summer action research team meet at 99Rootz in Merced, CA to launch CVFS 2018 in June 2018.

This report, divided into four main sections, describes CVFS and its efforts to support and document civic engagement among low-income youth of color, particularly those living in immigrant and other racially diverse communities with histories of poor voter turnout. In the first section, we describe the California Central Valley context. In the second section, we share some of the challenges to voting that affect the region's young residents of color. The third section focuses on CVFS, describing the training of university students and the implementation of their efforts to get out the vote. The final section offers recommendations for future initiatives that aim to civically engage youth from similar communities. This report also contains appendices with further information on partner organizations and CVFS.

<sup>1</sup> We define the Central Valley as including Kern, Kings, Tulare, Fresno, Madera, Calaveras, Merced, Stanislaus, Tuolumne, and San Joaquin counties.

## The Central Valley Context and Consequences for Young Voter Engagement

Tucked between the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the east and the Coast Ranges to the west, the Central Valley extends south from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta to the Tehachapi Mountains. Latinx immigrants and their descendants comprise the majority (52%) of the population in this 10-county region. Most Latinx residents are of Mexican origin (Mexican immigrants make up 89% of foreign-born Latinx residents), with the remaining primarily claiming roots in El Salvador or other Central American countries. While Mexicans have lived in the Central Valley since before the United States annexed California, the Latinx population grew tremendously after World War II as a result of the exponential expansion of the agricultural industry and related demands for low-wage labor (Walker 2004). The Bracero Program (1942-1964), which actively recruited Mexican men to work in the fields, initially filled much of this demand (Walker 2004). Peaking in 1956 with 450,000 laborers, the program contributed to the eventual settlement of some Mexican workers in the Central Valley's growing cities and rural towns, where they were joined by their families or formed new ones. Currently, the Latinx population in the region is fairly young: about 57% of Latinx residents are aged 30 and under, compared to 32% of White residents.

Latinx residents in the region experience economic, political, and other forms of social inequality. For example, Latinx workers' average yearly wage income (\$31,157) is much lower than that of their White counterparts (\$51,394). Meanwhile, approximately 26% of Latinx residents live in poverty, while only 13% of Whites do (ACS 2017, author calculations).

This older White population exercises significantly more political power than the younger majority Latinx population. The White population's political clout is tied to the agricultural, oil, and construction industries (Pastor 2018). Older White residents, who dominate the active electorate, tend to lean right and overwhelmingly supported Trump in the 2016 election. Long before Trump, however, conservative White political views were rooted in the exclusion of and discrimination against minority groups. In the 1930s, racial conflict spread within the agricultural labor force and led to the mass deportation of hundreds of thousands of Mexicans and Filipinos from the Central Valley. The consequential labor shortages were filled by Whites who had migrated to California to flee the Dust Bowl (Walker 2004), bringing with them conservative politics fueled by racism and solidified through Ku Klux Klan violence across the region. The consolidation of White political power in the Valley has contributed to a long-lasting legacy of racism in this region of the state, often referred to by scholars as California's "Deep South" (Essinger 2011; Schwaller 2018).

Today, a staunch culture of conservatism and racial contention continues to characterize the Central Valley, leading to the political suppression of its large Latinx communities. For example, Latinx individuals are incarcerated and killed by law enforcement at a higher rate than anywhere else in the United States (Schwaller 2018). Additionally, though the history of farmworker struggles is widely taught across the nation, Central Valley schools do not necessarily include the United Farm Workers, Cesar Chavez, or Dolores Huerta in their curriculum. As conservative White politics continue to dominate the region, Latinx groups remain subject to xenophobic and racist treatment (Schwaller 2018). This legacy of suppression demonstrates why the effort to mobilize Latinx and other low-income youth of color in the Central Valley is so necessary and noteworthy. While Latinx immigrants and their descendants outnumber the aging White population, they exercise relatively little political power—in part because of the low registration and voting rates among their fairly young population.

## Confronting Challenges to Engaging Young Voters of Color

Young voters in the Central Valley are considered low propensity—or unlikely—voters for several reasons. Young people typically have less of an understanding than older adults about how government shapes their livelihoods and opportunities (Verba et al. 1995; Phelps 2004; Strama 1998). Additionally, political parties devote fewer resources to reaching younger voters than they do to older voters with demonstrated voting or donation track records (Barreto 2018).

In the Central Valley, many young voters of color lack exposure to and information about the voting process and the importance of voting. Youth of color often come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and/or are raised by immigrant parents who experience their own challenges to voting. Specifically, compared to young people with college-educated and native-born parents, those from less privileged and immigrant backgrounds are less likely to learn about government elections from their parents (Terriquez and Kwon 2015). Additionally, high schools often contribute to inequality in turnout among young voters. Schools in lower-income communities of color are less likely than those in affluent White communities to offer a strong civics curriculum that prepares and motivates students to become informed voters (Levinson 2010). Moreover, [while social media platforms theoretically have the potential to address voting disparities](#), social media often have a greater effect on turnout among those who are already politically engaged (CIRCLE 2018).

**How can young people of color become active and informed voters?** Research shows that youth civic associations, and in particular youth organizing groups, effectively foster civic and political participation among low-income young people of color. The number of youth organizing groups—which engage their members in grassroots campaigns to change governmental policies—has increased significantly in California over the past decade.<sup>2</sup> Some of these organizations have also devoted more resources to encouraging 16- and 17-year-olds to pre-register to vote and making sure that those who are 18 and over turn out to vote. However, the oldest and largest youth organizing groups have been concentrated in Los Angeles and the Bay Area, while those in the largely agricultural Central Valley have tended to be newer, smaller organizations. During the 2018 election cycle, CVFS sought to bolster local youth organizing groups’ campaigns to address the region’s complexities and challenges to young voter turnout.

## Freedom Summer and Voter Engagement Efforts

While inspired by the heroic 1964 voter registration campaign led by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, CVFS was modeled after other UC student internship programs, such as UCLA’s Dream Summer Program and the Labor Summer Research Internship Program. It also built on community-engaged research efforts at UC Santa Cruz, as well as UC Merced’s multi-disciplinary Community Research and Service minor. At the same time, CVFS sought to provide opportunities for young Latinx students at UC Santa Cruz and UC Merced to connect with organizations and work to enhance civic participation in their home communities. Students selected for the project expressed a deep commitment to addressing social injustices and building political power among the low-income people of color in the Central Valley.

Because conducting research and community work requires training, CVFS students were required to enroll in coursework at UC Santa Cruz or UC Merced prior to conducting summer work. The course introduced them to youth organizing, voter registration, voter education, and participatory action research. Additionally, the course helped deepen students’ understanding of education, immigration, labor, environmental, and health issues affecting young people of color and their communities.

---

<sup>2</sup> Private foundations, and in particular The California Endowment, have invested in these groups across the state of California.

As a course assignment, students collectively developed voter education workshops and registered eligible voters on campus. In preparation for the summer, students also conducted a voter registration campaign during spring break in 2018, where they connected with high schools or community colleges in their own communities in order to register voters. As part of their efforts to register young voters in their hometowns, students were also required to build organizing teams of at least five peers from their communities. These youth organizing teams were imperative to CVFS efforts and beyond, as they were intended to build sustainable and effective horizontal networks of grassroots organizing beyond the university (See [online appendix](#) for UC Santa Cruz course information).

By summer, students were prepared to lead interactive workshops on voting that sought to demonstrate the significant age and racial gaps in voter turnout rates. Specifically, they emphasized the fact that during the 2014 midterm election, senior citizens aged 65-74 voted at seven times the rate of young adults aged 18-24 (57% compared to 8%, respectively). Moreover, student leaders reminded their peers that young voters were disproportionately people of color, while older, politically active voters were predominantly White. Student leaders would then facilitate discussions regarding how this racial and age gap in voting affected immigrant rights, environmental justice, police racial profiling, education equity, and other local issues that matter to them. These workshops sought to highlight the potential of the youth vote in ensuring more equitable political representation.

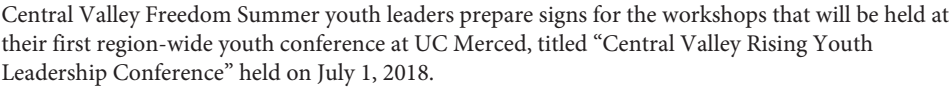
CVFS student leaders augmented the existing civic infrastructure by participating in summer internships in community organizations that were already seeking to politically engage low-income communities of color. Students were placed in one of the following groups: [99Rootz](#) (Merced and Fresno Counties); [Act for Women and Girls](#) (Tulare County); [Californians for Justice](#) (Fresno County); [the Center on Race, Poverty, and the Environment](#) (Kern County); [the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights](#) (Tulare County); the [Dolores Huerta Foundation](#) (Kern County); [Fathers and Families of San Joaquin](#) (San Joaquin County); and [Mi Familia Vota](#) (Stanislaus and Fresno Counties). Partner organizations expanded students' professional networks and provided them with invaluable guidance in navigating the political landscape. Partner groups also provided students with additional training, meeting spaces, supplies, and other resources to further their efforts. Local organizations constituted an infrastructure that could engage newly activated youth beyond a single summer. They also exposed students to possible employment within the Central Valley, helping to counter the "brain drain" of educated individuals who leave the region for career options elsewhere.

During the summer, students divided their time among supporting organizations' existing campaigns, conducting voter registration and education, planning local conferences, and conducting broader outreach regarding the importance of voting through activism (arts activism) and media outreach. In these activities, students tapped into their family and community networks to develop and train local organizing teams. After training at a UC Merced conference at the end of June, these local teams were then responsible for carrying out voter registration drives, workshops, and other outreach activities in their local communities. Some relied on former high school teachers and mentors to schedule outreach efforts during summer school and help them access broader networks of youth. Overall, CVFS students registered or pre-registered over 4,000 new voters.

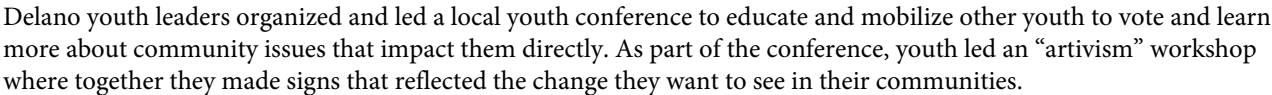
Student leaders and their local organizing teams spent significant time planning and hosting seven daylong conferences that helped to inform youth about local issues to make them aware of their potential individual and collective power, and to further motivate them to get to the polls. Held in Atwater (Merced County), Avenal (Kings County), Ceres (Stanislaus County), Delano (Kern County), Porterville (Tulare County) Sanger (Fresno County), and Stockton (San Joaquin County), these conferences targeted adolescents and young adults. Through student-led workshops, leaders sought to address the disconnect between what students learn at school and the actual practice of democracy.



As researchers, students kept logs of their work, took field notes that described and critically analyzed their efforts, collected evaluations of conferences, and tracked lessons learned for future replication. These field notes evidenced young people's enthusiasm for learning about local issues and how they could affect change. Quite notably, it was clear that in many cases young participants acquired information about the voting process and community concerns that they were not necessarily receiving from schools, the media, political parties, or their families.



As researchers, students kept logs of their work, took field notes that described and critically analyzed their efforts, collected evaluations of conferences, and tracked lessons learned for future replication. These field notes evidenced young people's enthusiasm for learning about local issues and how they could affect change. Quite notably, it was clear that in many cases young participants acquired information about the voting process and community concerns that they were not necessarily receiving from schools, the media, political parties, or their families.



CVFS students aimed to achieve broader visibility of their efforts through social media postings and activism —artwork, murals, and short videos that celebrate youth voice and power. To this end, they regularly updated and maintained Instagram and Facebook accounts. Incoming UC Santa Cruz freshman Adria Vidales worked with youth to paint a mural at Fathers and Families in Stockton, and Melissa Figueroa and the Avenal team leaders worked with artist Erik Gonzalez from the Urbanist Collective to paint a large mural in the community’s business district. Additionally, over the course of the summer, students appeared in 24 print and online stories and worked with UC Santa Cruz graduate student Aria Zapata to produce two short films, “[Voices of the Valley](#)” and “[Alamin Ang Yug Ugat \(Reclaim your Roots\)](#),” as well as additional video clips to advertise their efforts. Beyond eligible young voters, CVFS also targeted arts and media outreach to those who were not yet 18 (but who could pre-register to vote at age 16 per California law), as well as to non-citizens, who have a lot at stake in elections and who have the power to mobilize others on their behalf.



The completed Central Valley Freedom mural located in Fathers and Families of San Joaquin Valley in Stockton, CA.



Avenal residents and artists from the Urbanist Collective pose in front of their local Central Valley Freedom mural in Avenal, CA.

At the same time, **the research revealed the challenges and opportunities for conducting civics education in semi-rural and other communities that lack a history of student activism.** Such efforts require significant work and problem-solving. Young residents were sometimes skeptical of CVFS leaders’ claims that they could contribute to improvements in their communities. Buy-in from adults often required persistence. For example, some high school administrators and staff in Kern, Tulare, Kings, Stanislaus, and San Joaquin Counties initially blocked students from registering and pre-registering voters on school grounds, even though the California state education code encourages nonpartisan voter registration on high school campuses. In response, students sought help from supportive school board members and community leaders to facilitate access to high schools.

To make voter registration easier in the future, CVFS leaders in Delano and Stockton worked with allies on their school boards, which passed school district resolutions that aimed to further nonpartisan voter registration and pre-registration targeting high school students. Delano’s resolution declared September as “Outreach Month,” established a Youth Voters Committee, and allowed trained students and graduates to register high school students on campus. Meanwhile, Stockton Unified School District passed a resolution directing district leadership to distribute voter registration cards to all high school seniors and encourage them to complete and submit the forms to the Registrar of Voters during graduation ceremonial activities. Students got the idea for these resolutions from Power California, which had worked with youth in Merced and Los Angeles Counties to advocate for similar resolutions. The hope is that these resolutions, included in an [online appendix](#), will increase the number of active young voters in these two districts.



## Expanding an Informed Young Electorate

The CVFS Participatory Action Research Project shows the potential outcomes when we politically engage young people of color residing in conservative, rural, semi-rural, and agricultural regions. In partnership with community organizations, student leaders successfully pre-registered and registered young voters, while providing invaluable education to help young people understand the connection between their votes and life in their community. These grassroots efforts contributed to the impressive increase in voter turnout between 2014 and 2018. Based on our experience, we offer the following

three suggestions for university-community projects or other initiatives seeking to engage young people in the electoral process.

**1. Tailored voter education.** By attending workshops and engaging in other educational outreach programs, young people can deepen their understanding of the voting process and how elections impact them, their families, and communities. Through incorporating elements of ethnic, gender, and LGBTQ studies, such efforts can focus on the specific demographics and interests of targeted youth. Young people can become motivated to participate in the electoral process if they see how the disproportionate age gap among typical voters can affect education, services, and issues that matter to their particular communities. For example, CVFS workshops linked voter participation to social issues impacting youth of color, immigrants, and farmworker families. Workshops informed non-citizens and underage residents that they have rights to mobilize voters even when they cannot vote themselves. Young people also benefited from assistance in properly filling out voter registration forms and in submitting ballots through the mail or at the voting booth.



Central Valley Freedom Summer youth organizers and Dr. Veronica Terriquez pose with labor activist Dolores Huerta at the Delano, CA youth conference, titled “#661 Youth Summit” and held on August 4, 2018.



Youth leaders from across the Central Valley commit to take action in their local communities after attending the two-day Central Valley Rising Youth Leadership Conference.

**2. Partner with high schools and college campuses.** Large numbers of students can be registered and educated through nonpartisan classroom workshops, assemblies, information tables, and other events hosted on school campuses. Young people are particularly receptive when peers encourage them to exercise their political rights; thus, youth-led programming can complement or reinforce school-sponsored civics education. Voter outreach groups can leverage existing state or district policies that facilitate access to schools. For example, California’s K-12 state education code designates the last two full weeks in April and September to be “Voter Education Weeks” in order to encourage voter registration and nonpartisan voter outreach. As noted earlier, some school districts have also developed their own policies to encourage voter outreach.

**3. Link to community-based organizations.** Youth-serving community-based organizations can help develop young leaders who sustain youth engagement beyond a single election season. It is important to make clear that voting is only part of the solution to social inequalities. Sustained grassroots organizing and ongoing participation in elections are necessary to help shape local policies, hold elected officials accountable, and effect systemic change. Because some community-based organizations are a consistent presence in the lives of young people, supporting their capacity to conduct voter outreach can have a longer impact on civic engagement.

As evidenced by CVFS and the work of partner organizations, young people of color in low-income agricultural communities can learn to invest in politics. With proper support from civic institutions—including schools and community groups—those who are often overlooked or ignored by traditional political campaigns and mainstream media can play a role in advancing an understanding of why and how voting matters. **Through the leadership of young people from marginalized communities, we can achieve a more representative and inclusive electorate.**

#### **Appendices:**

[Appendix A: Central Valley Freedom Summer Youth Leaders & Resolutions](#)

[Appendix B: Central Valley Groups YVOTE Youth Leadership, Central Valley Preliminary Findings](#)

[Appendix C: Community Partner Profiles](#)

[Appendix D: CVFS Youth Conferences](#)

[Appendix E: Curriculum](#)

**Report design credit:** Jonathan Sanchez, UC Santa Cruz undergraduate, Sociology major, Latin American & Latino Studies minor.

#### **About the Authors**

**Veronica Terriquez** is an Associate Professor of Sociology at UC Santa Cruz. Her research focuses on immigrant incorporation, civic engagement, social inequality, and Latinos in the U.S.

**Randy Villegas** is from Bakersfield, California and a Ph.D. student in Politics at UC Santa Cruz with research interests in California politics, especially in the Central Valley, and voting behavior.

**Roxanna Villalobos** is from Parlier, California and a Ph.D. student in Sociology at UC Santa Cruz with research interests in rural Latina girlhood, in particular in the Central Valley, and immigration/migration.



Youth leaders from across the Central Valley commit to take action in their local communities after attending the two-day Central Valley Rising Youth Leadership Conference.



## References

- Anon. n.d. "CIRCLE RSS. "Five Takeaways on Social Media and the Youth Vote in 2018." Retrieved January 20, 2020 (<https://civicyouth.org/five-takeaways-on-social-media-and-the-youthvote-in-2018/>).
- Barreto, M.A. 2018. "The Cycle of Undermobilization of Minority Voters," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 3(1): 185-188.
- Essinger, Michael. 2011. "Kern County: California's Deep South." Essay delivered at the "Critical Ethnic Studies and the Future of Genocide: Settler Colonialism/Heteropatriarchy/White Supremacy" conference. University of California, Riverside. Retrieved online: ([http://www.academia.edu/1519415/Kern\\_County\\_Californias\\_Deep\\_South](http://www.academia.edu/1519415/Kern_County_Californias_Deep_South)).
- Levinson, Meira. 2010. "The Civic Empowerment Gap: Defining the Problem and Locating Solutions." Pp. 331- 361 in *Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement in Youth*, edited by Torney-Purta, Judith, Constance Flanagan, and Lonnie R. Sherrod. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Pastor, Manuel. 2018. *State of Resistance: What California's Dizzying Descent and Remarkable Resurgence Mean for America's Future*. New York: The New Press.
- Phelps, Edward. "Young Citizens and Changing Electoral Turnout, 1964–2001." *Political Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 3, July–Sept 2004, pp. 238-248.
- Schwaller, Shawn. 2018. "Greetings from Bakersfield! Law Enforcement Corruption, White Supremacy, and Latinx Lives in California's Deep Red South." Retrieved October 16, 2018 (<https://boomcalifornia.com/2018/10/16/greetings-from-bakersfield/>).
- Strama, Mark. "Overcoming Cynicism: Youth Participation and Electoral Politics." *National Civic Review*, vol. 87, no. 1, Spring 98, p. 71.
- Terriquez, Veronica, and Hyeyoung Kwon. 2015. "Intergenerational Family Relations, Civic Organisations, and the Political Socialisation of Second-generation Immigrant Youth." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41(3), 425-447.
- US Census Bureau. 2017. "American Community Survey Data." The United States Census Bureau. Retrieved online (<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data.html>).
- Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. 1995. *Voice and Equality Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Walker, Richard. 2004. *The Conquest of Bread: 150 Years of Agribusiness in California*. New York: The New Press.

**This report has been published by UC Santa Cruz's Research Center for the Americas and the USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity.**

**USC**  
**Dornsife**  
*Program for  
Environmental and  
Regional Equity*



**RESEARCH  
CENTER  
FOR THE  
AMERICAS**

**DIALOGUES WITHOUT BORDERS**