

The Impact of Language Assistance on Voter Turnout: Lessons from California

California Secretary of State's Language Accessibility Advisory Committee

Dēmos

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What we'll discuss today

- Key takeaway
- Background
- Research questions
- The data
- Findings
- Limitations
- Recommendations



Key takeaway: Turnout was higher in covered counties

California counties covered by language assistance requirements had 2020 voter turnout 7 to 14 percentage points higher than comparable counties with no language assistance.

The same pattern appears in counties that provided only translated sample ballots.

1M+

REGISTERED VOTERS

Asked for non-English materials.

40%

ELIGIBLE LEP VOTERS

In covered groups, asked for translated materials.

3.0M

LEP ELIGIBLE VOTERS

All languages. More than any other state.

12%

SHARE OF ELECTORATE

About 1 in 9 eligible voters.

LEP voters in California

By the numbers

Voter file figures as of February 1, 2021. Population figures from the Census Bureau's 2021 Section 203 coverage determinations and the American Community Survey.

California records language preference at registration.

Two mandates

Different languages, different requirements

SECTION 203

Federal Voting Rights Act.
Translated votable ballots and materials in Spanish, Asian, and American Indian and Alaska Native languages.

VOTABLE BALLOTS REQUIRED

SECTION 14201

California Elections Code.
Translated sample ballots, though precincts may provide a votable ballot instead.

SAMPLE BALLOTS REQUIRED

HOW THEY DIFFER

Federal and state laws have different language, eligibility, and ballot requirements.

What we asked



How many registered voters request election materials in a language other than English, and which language groups ask most often?



How does turnout in counties covered by a language assistance mandate compare with turnout in counties that are not covered?

The data

California's 2020 general election

“Assessing Multilingual Language Material Usage and Impact Through Administrative Data” by Fraga, Khoshkhoo, Lee, and Nguyen.

Administrative data from California's voter registration file as of February 2021: 21.9 million registration records, linked to census tabulations to identify language group and limited English proficiency (LEP) status.

Turnout figures are estimates from regression models that account for each county's overall turnout rate.

Special thanks to Dr. Bernard Fraga of Emory University and our colleagues at AALDEF for their collaboration on this project.

Evidence of strong demand

More than 1 million requests, 40 percent of eligible LEP voters in covered groups

Other research suggests language assistance creates a more inclusive environment that benefits even English-proficient voters who don't request translated materials.



60%**KOREAN**

Highest request rate.

45%**SPANISH**

Second highest, and the largest group.

11%**TAGALOG**

Covered by state law in most counties.

9%**HINDI**

Lowest request rate.

Who requests materials

Request rates range from 9 to 60 percent

Share of LEP eligible voters in each group who have requested materials in their language. Counts, not model estimates. Groups with at least 1,000 requests.

A sample ballot only helps a voter who can find it.

Why rates differ

Outreach, need, mandate design



OUTREACH

Counties and community groups have invested more in some languages.



ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Vietnamese and Korean communities have higher LEP rates than Filipino and Indian communities.

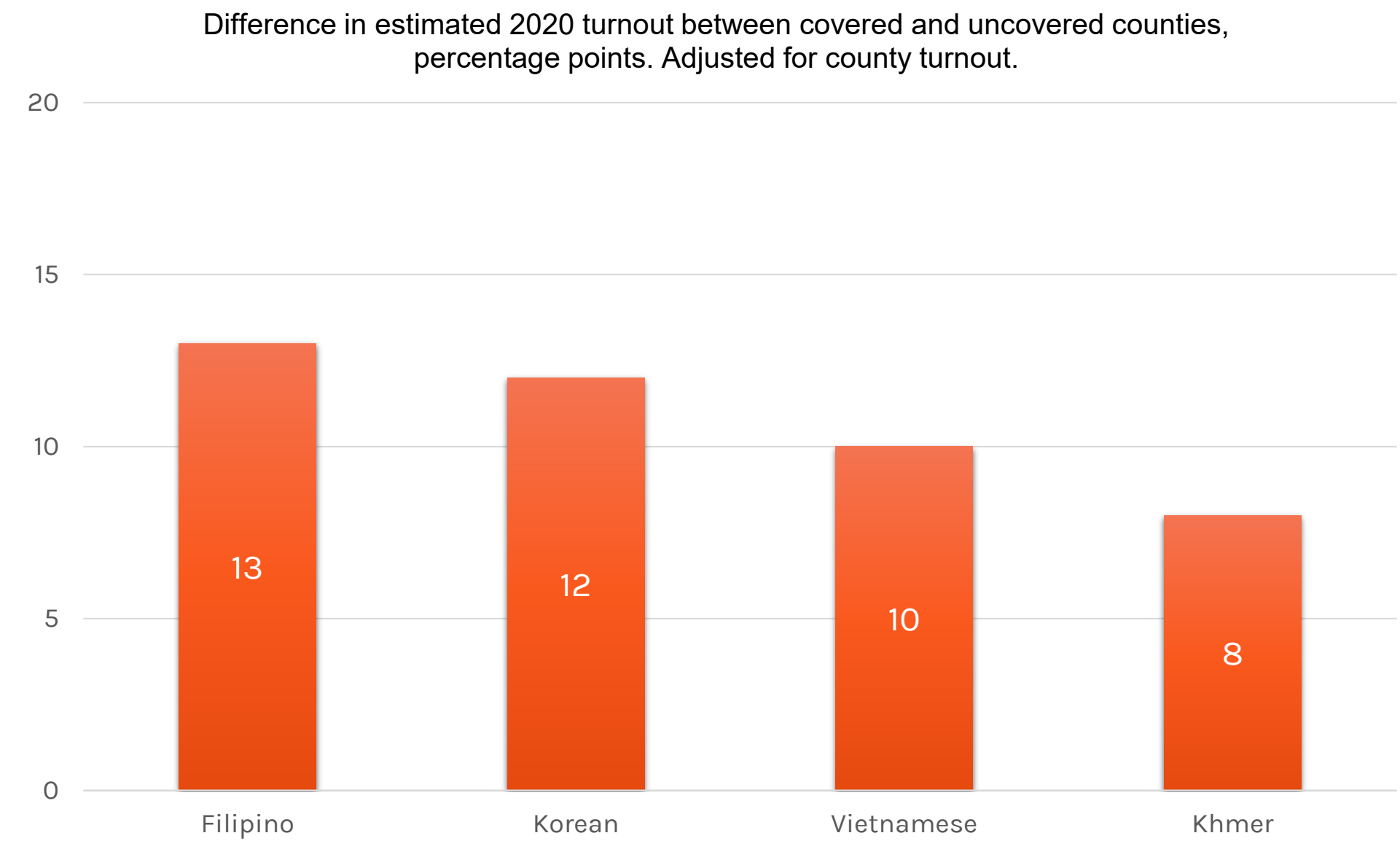


DIFFERENT REQUIREMENTS

Section 203: a votable ballot. Section 14201: a sample ballot.

Section 203

Four groups higher in covered counties



+13

FILIPINO

Turnout: 64% in covered counties, 51% in uncovered.

+12

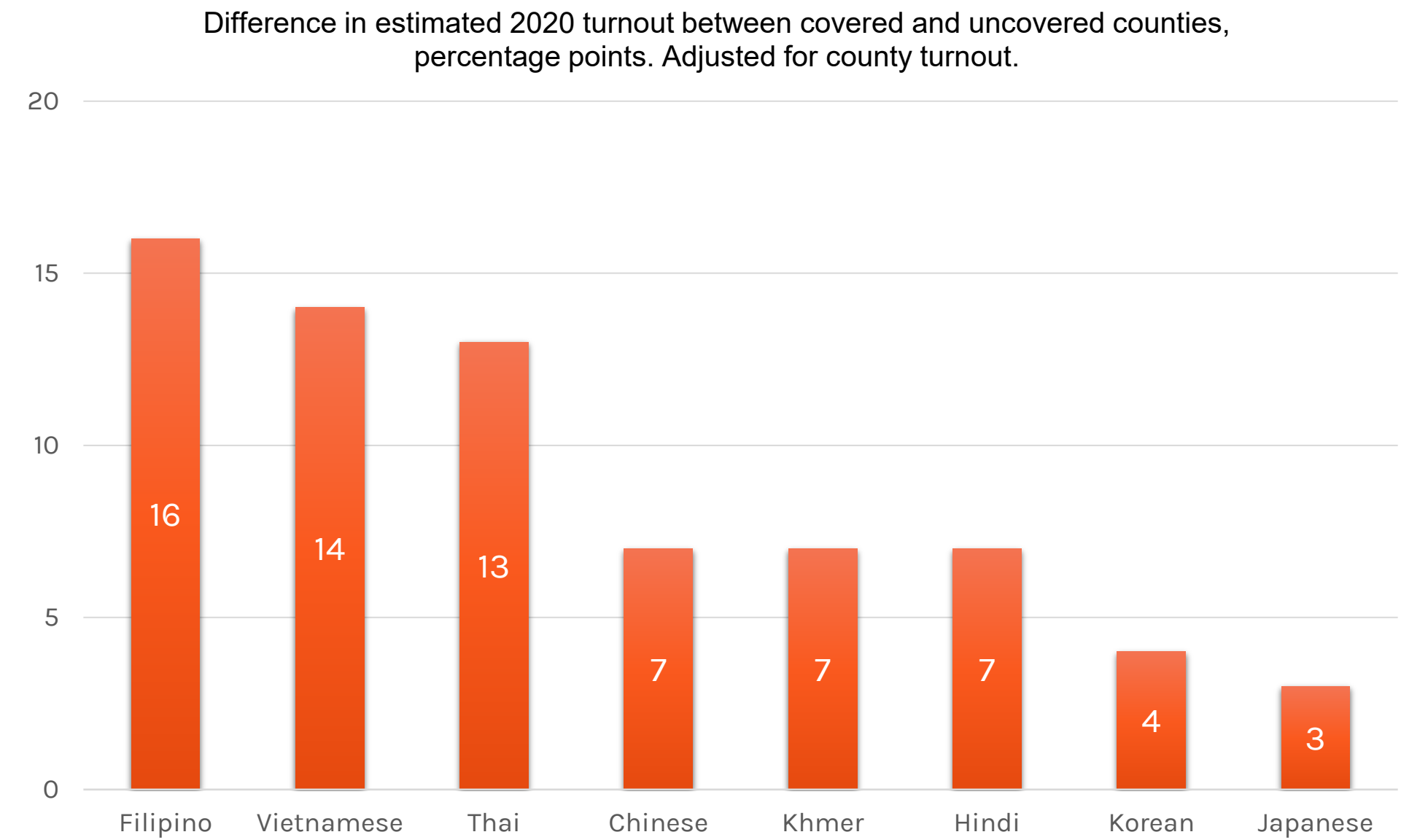
KOREAN

Turnout: 63% in covered counties, 51% in uncovered.

Model estimates, among voters who requested materials. Chinese groups ran 5 points lower. Intervals are wide.

Section 14201

All eight groups higher in covered counties



+16

FILIPINO
Turnout: 67% in covered counties, 51% in uncovered.

+14

VIETNAMESE
Turnout: 73% in covered counties, 59% in uncovered.

Model estimates, among voters who requested materials. Spanish had no reliable uncovered-county comparison. Intervals are wide.

Limitations

What this study can and cannot show

- One election. Administrative data from 2020 only.
- Non-random coverage. Both mandates trigger on population thresholds.
- Modeled characteristics. Race, ethnicity, language, and LEP status are estimated rather than self-reported.
- Wide intervals. Several estimates carry wide 95 percent confidence intervals.
- Estimates, not experiments. The models account for county turnout but cannot show that language assistance caused the difference.

Recommendations

What voters receive



WHERE THESE COME FROM

Practice recommendations, drawn from the patterns above together with feedback from language assistance advocates and the California Language Access Working Group.



EXPAND THE LANGUAGES

State law gives the Secretary of State discretion to cover other languages. Arabic is covered in only two counties, Fresno and San Diego. In Los Angeles County, 123 precincts have enough Arabic speakers to qualify, but the language remains uncovered there.



TRANSLATED VOTABLE BALLOTS

In every language meeting state or federal population thresholds. Sample ballots at minimum, as true facsimiles; composites confuse voters.

Recommendations

Voting in person, and by mail



SIGNAGE AND STAFFING

Make multilingual materials and oral translation services prominent and visible at every polling location, and train poll workers so anyone who wants a multilingual ballot or oral assistance can get one.



INTERPRETER TRAINING

Recruit and train interpreters in person, and train them to approach community members unaware that language services exist.



SEND MAIL BASED ON STATED PREFERENCE

Automatically mail translated ballot materials and official ballots using the language preference on the registration form.

Recommendations

The systems behind language access

TRANSLATION ACCURACY

Let community groups publicly review translations. Prioritize oral interpretation, hotlines as backup.

COUNTY COORDINATOR

A coordinator or group as the point of contact for community questions and concerns.

YEAR-ROUND OUTREACH

Fund engagement with language-minority communities between elections.

LANGUAGE PREFERENCE DATA

Collect it on registration forms in every state, covered or not.

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