

Statewide Investigation On Voting Rights and Language Access: What Voters in California Need to Cast Their Ballot

Our democracy is stronger when we can cast our ballots with ease and confidence. Around 44% of Californians speak a language other than English at home, and we take pride in that diversity.

Yet, when California does not keep up with our growing multiracial and multilingual communities, voters cannot fairly and equally cast their ballot. Our current laws create barriers to voting for people who use non-English languages.

In the past year, community members across California have come together to share what they need to become active, informed, and confident voters. In several listening sessions throughout the state, including San Francisco, voters who speak different languages including Chinese, Arabic, Khmer, Korean, Somali, and Spanish, talked about the barriers they face while voting and what would be helpful to them.



6.5 million Californians over 5 years old are use non English languages

84% of whom are immigrants

“Some don’t even vote at all even though they are eligible due to [language barriers].”

— Arabic-speaking listening session participant



Californians’ insights and ideas on voting and research on language access in elections policies helped shape a new report by civil rights and community organizations, which many groups are using to encourage state legislators and county officials to improve voting so that all eligible voters can cast their ballots.

*Find highlights of our research below
and read the full investigation report at bit.ly/CALA2023.*

Investigation Findings

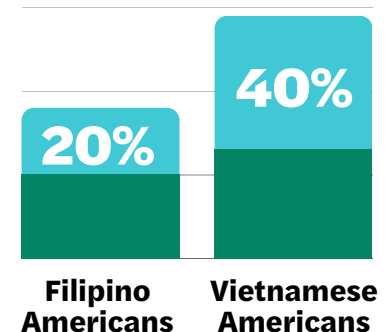
Voting Increases When People Can Register and Vote In Their Language

Many community members expressed how important it is for them to be able to register and vote in different languages. When people are able to get help in the language they use, they are also more likely to register to vote and cast their ballot. For example, voter registration rose by more than 20% for Filipino Americans and by almost 40% for Vietnamese Americans when San Diego County started providing translated voting materials and recruiting bilingual poll workers for those communities.

California Is Falling Behind

Oregon provides voter registration in Somali and Russian, and county voter guides in Arabic, French, Portuguese, Russian, and Ukrainian. Michigan provides voter registration and translated votable ballots beyond its federal requirements as well. California was once a leader but has fallen behind by not providing similar translated materials for growing communities in our state.

Voter Increase from Language Assistance in San Diego County



What Californians Need to Fully Participate in Elections

“The ballot must be translated in Chinese, and the Department of Elections should be more explicit about language needs. Voting is inaccessible to many limited English proficiency community members, especially seniors that also have technology barriers.”

— Sophie Zeng, who became a U.S. citizen in 2020



Many community members who were interviewed in the listening sessions emphasized a clear path forward for California, rooted in their experiences trying to register, understand their ballots, and cast their votes. Our listening sessions underscored that:

- Californians should be able to register to vote and check their registration status in their language
- A full understanding of what is on their ballot in their language is crucial to being an informed voter
- Communities need all elections materials in their language to be a self-reliant voters, who do not rely on family and friends to translate

Counties should address the needs of voters who cannot fairly or equally vote because of the language they use. The proven solutions below are already making a difference in other states and should be implemented by counties throughout California.

Recommendations for CA Counties in the 2024 Elections and Beyond

Ahead of the 2024 elections, we need counties throughout California to make progress towards a truly inclusive and representative democracy by:

- Setting a standard to improve and expand the dissemination of these resources
- Providing comprehensive language assistance to large groups in languages beyond Spanish, Asian, and Native American languages
- Providing votable ballots and registration forms, generally and at poll sites, in the languages used and preferred by smaller communities
 - Los Angeles and Madera counties have already implemented providing votable ballots in all languages through ballot-marking devices

Luckily, many counties in California already have the technologies and capabilities to make these improvements. It is now a question of when the state and county officials will respond to community demands and implement these changes in our state.

“Voting is important to me because it’s a way of living, if you don’t vote well it affects you and vice versa. Being able to voice my opinion and thoughts is important to me.”

— Yanqi Zhang, who has lived in San Francisco for 12 years and became a U.S. citizen in 2016



If you’d like more information on how to register to vote, vote in your language, or get involved in advocating for California’s multilingual democracy, contact us at 415-274-6750 or info@caasf.org.

Learn more on how to register to vote at registertovote.ca.gov.