



# The Impact of Language Assistance on Voter Turnout

## Lessons from California

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**Demos**

**aaldef**

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# About AALDEF

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The Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) was founded in 1974 to protect and promote the civil rights of Asian Americans. AALDEF serves diverse Asian communities around the country in solidarity with each other, communities of color, and marginalized groups. Community lawyering is at the heart of AALDEF's work, which combines litigation, advocacy, education, and organizing to secure human rights for all people.

# About Dēmos

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Dēmos is a non-profit public policy organization working to build a just, inclusive, multiracial democracy and economy. We work hand in hand to build power with and for Black and brown communities, forging strategic alliances with grassroots and state-based organizations.

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# Summary

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**A recent study of California election data shows that Limited English Proficient (LEP) people turn out to vote at higher rates in precincts that provide ballots in their preferred languages.**

The study, [Assessing Multilingual Language Material Usage and Impact Through Administrative Data](#),<sup>1</sup> shows that in 2020, more than one million registered voters in California confirmed to state or local officials that they preferred election materials in a language other than English. This accounts for nearly 40 percent of eligible LEP voters in California who are part of language groups\* covered by state or federal language assistance laws, though the exact rate varies by language group. Counties that provided multilingual ballots had 7 to 14 percent higher voter turnout than counties without such language assistance.

**This effect holds even in counties that only provided translated sample ballots rather than translated votable ballots.**

The high uptake demonstrates that multilingual ballots are not merely symbolic offerings but a critical tool to empower more eligible voters to participate in our democracy. [Other research suggests](#) that language assistance also creates a more inclusive environment that benefits even English-proficient voters who don't request translated voting materials.

The popularity of multilingual ballots shows that they are not merely symbolic offerings but a critical tool to empower more eligible voters to participate in our democracy.

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\* Language group labels reflect those used in the study and in U.S. Census Bureau data sources, including terms for specific languages (for example, Spanish, Tagalog) as well as broader group labels (for example, Latino, Filipino). These labels do not necessarily reflect the terms preferred by all members of these communities.

These findings are significant because, historically, language barriers have suppressed turnout among voters of color, especially [Latino](#) and [Asian American](#) people. The two groups represent [a majority of all U.S. immigrant eligible voters](#) — naturalized citizens who are over 18.

Of course, more can be done to align the political power of voters of color with their population size. These voters represented a majority (55 percent) of the state’s eligible voters. Yet voter turnout for Latino (55 percent), Asian (60 percent), and Black (64 percent) Californians trailed that of the state’s white residents (75 percent), according to an analysis of census data by the Latino Policy and Politics Institute.<sup>2</sup>

The data from California presents a compelling case that language assistance helps increase electoral participation. Going forward, multilingual election policies should improve and build on what exists in California. For example, while the state provides multilingual ballot assistance under both federal and state law, languages such as Haitian Creole remain uncovered, and [Arabic currently receives coverage](#) in only two counties (Fresno and San Diego). In Los Angeles County, 123 precincts have enough Arabic speakers to qualify for multilingual ballots under state law population thresholds, but the language remains uncovered in the county. This is because California generally follows federal language assistance guidelines, which cover only Spanish, Asian, and American Indian and Alaska Native languages. However, state law gives the secretary of state discretion to cover other languages.

This policy brief will summarize findings from the study of California’s election data showing how often different language groups requested multilingual ballots. The study shows that counties with multilingual ballot help often had higher voter turnout in 2020 than counties without language help. The brief concludes with a list of policy recommendations.

## Language Assistance Laws in California

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Two laws mandate multilingual ballot materials in California.

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**Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act requires certain jurisdictions (including many in California) to provide fully translated, votable ballots and other election materials in Spanish, Asian languages, and American Indian and Alaska Native languages.**

A jurisdiction, usually a county, must provide language assistance when a single language-minority group has more than 10,000 voting-age citizens who are limited English proficient (LEP) and have depressed literacy rates, or when the group makes up more than five percent of the citizen voting-age population, is LEP, and has depressed literacy rates.

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**California Elections Code Section 14201 extends language assistance requirements to certain languages not covered by federal law. It requires jurisdictions to provide translated sample (facsimile) ballots for certain languages, though precincts may opt to provide a translated votable ballot instead.**

Precincts must provide language assistance when three percent or more of their voting-age residents belong to a language minority group.

California counties can and sometimes do go beyond what the law requires. Los Angeles County, for example, provides translated votable ballots in all 13 of its languages covered by Section 14201.

# Multilingual Ballots Use

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In California, four in 10 LEP voters requested materials in their preferred language as of February 1, 2021, though certain language groups were more likely to do so than others.

## HIGHEST REQUEST RATES

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**60%** Korean  
**45%** Spanish  
**44%** Vietnamese

*Among California eligible voters*

## LOWEST REQUEST RATES

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**11%** Tagalog  
**11%** Khmer  
**9%** Hindi

*Among language groups who submitted more than 1,000 requests*

The differences in request rates likely reflect a mix of outreach, need, and implementation.

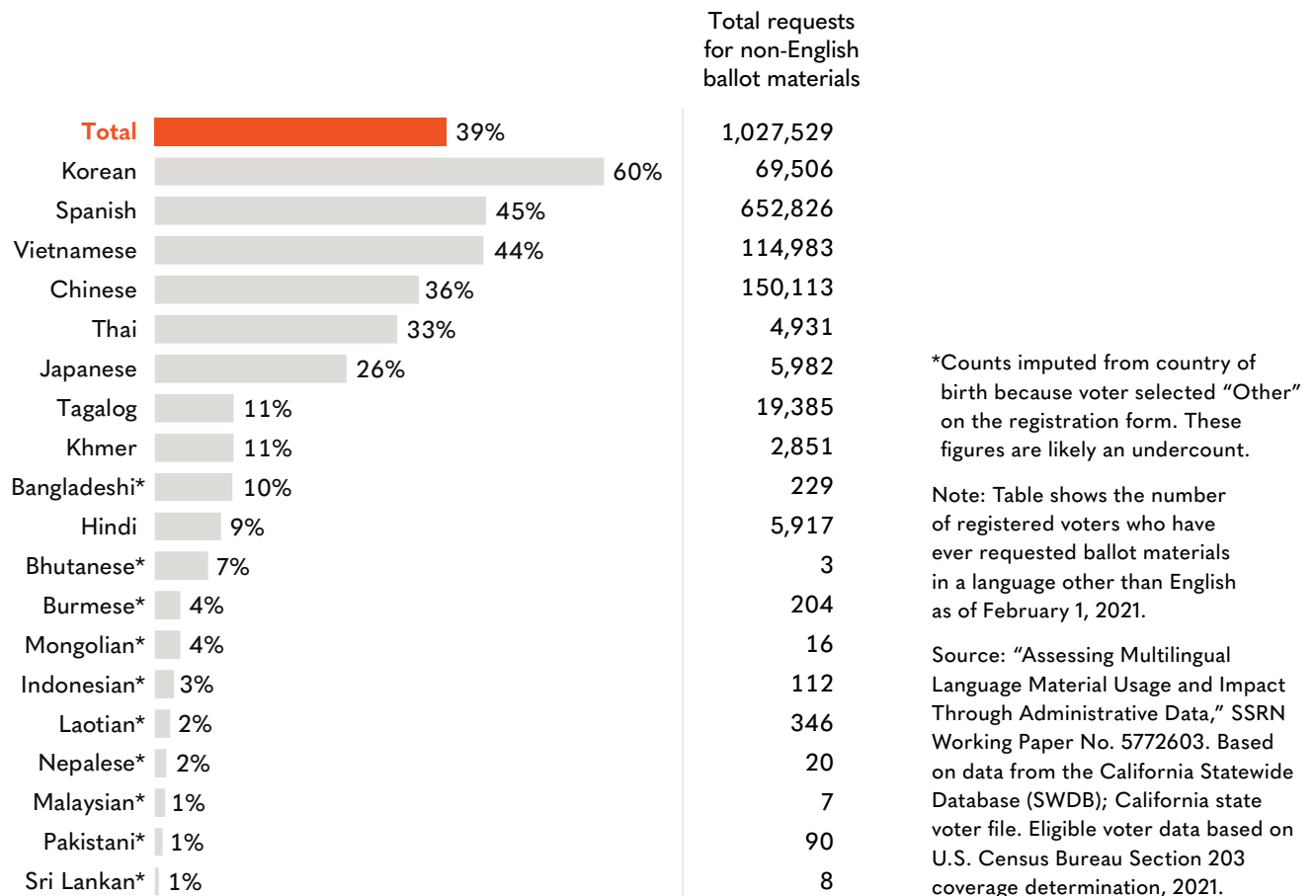
Some counties and community organizations have invested more heavily in outreach and voter education for some groups, especially among Korean, Spanish, and Vietnamese speakers.

In addition, English proficiency levels differ across language groups. Vietnamese and Korean communities, for example, have higher LEP rates than Filipino and Indian communities, so a larger share of their registrants may need translated materials to understand the ballot and feel comfortable voting.

Implementation is not uniform, because federal and state language assistance laws impose different requirements. In many counties in California, Korean, Spanish, and Vietnamese voters are more likely to receive fully translated votable ballots or vote by mail materials under Section 203, which mandates bilingual election materials. By contrast, Tagalog, Khmer, and Hindi speakers are often covered only under California’s Section 14201, which requires only translated facsimile or sample ballots. Research shows that LEP voters can have a [hard time finding](#) facsimile ballots at polling places, and poll workers may fail to make them available.

**Korean, Spanish, and Vietnamese language groups are most likely to request non-English ballot materials.**

*Percent of California eligible voters who have requested non-English ballot materials.*



# Language Assistance Linked to Higher Turnout

**Multilingual access to ballot materials is designed to ensure that language is not a barrier to casting a ballot. But do laws that guarantee language assistance change who turns out to vote?**

The study found that counties that were required to provide multilingual ballot assistance had higher LEP voter turnout than those without such mandates, signaling that these protections make a meaningful difference in whether the voices of LEP communities are heard.

## Section 203: Impact of Federal Language Assistance Law

Federal law requires translated voteable ballots, a stronger intervention than California's mandated translation of sample ballots. The study found that Filipino language groups in counties covered by Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act had an estimated voter turnout rate of 64 percent compared with 51 percent in uncovered counties. That 13-point difference was the highest of any language group covered under Section 203. Korean language groups had the next-highest increase, at 12 points, with an estimated 63 percent voter turnout in covered counties against 51 percent in uncovered counties.

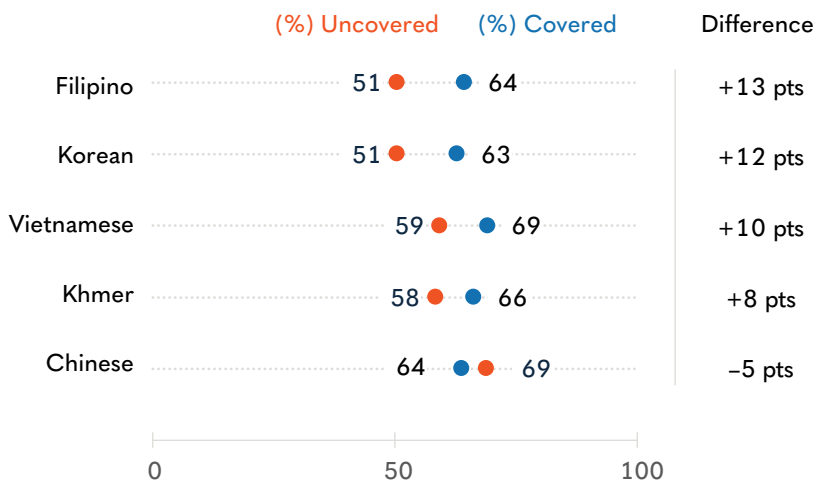
However, Chinese language groups had turnout that was five points lower in covered counties with Section 203 coverage. More study is needed to understand why this is. Voters in these areas may live in communities with less language outreach, or the assistance available may be misaligned with their specific needs.

Among Spanish-language groups, those in counties with Section 203 coverage had an estimated voter turnout rate of 65 percent. However, too few Spanish speakers lived in uncovered counties to produce a reliable estimate of the comparison group.

Where federal law required translated ballots under Section 203, those with limited English proficiency often had higher estimated voter turnout rates than in counties without mandated translations.

Results are among those who told state or local officials that they preferred materials in a language other than English.

County Voter Turnout



Note: Language groups shown are those with a large enough sample size to create estimated voter turnout rates for 2020. Voter turnout is among registered voters.

Source: "Assessing Multilingual Language Material Usage and Impact Through Administrative Data," SSRN Working Paper No. 5772603.

## Section 14201: Impact of California's Language Assistance Law

Even though California's language assistance law requires only translated sample ballots, this mandate is associated with higher voter turnout rates among several language groups.

For the Filipino language group, counties covered by Section 14201 had estimated voter turnout rates of 67 percent compared with 51 percent turnout in uncovered counties. The 16-point difference in turnout between covered and uncovered counties was the largest of any language group. Vietnamese (+14 points) and Thai (+13 points) language groups had the next-largest differences between covered and uncovered counties.

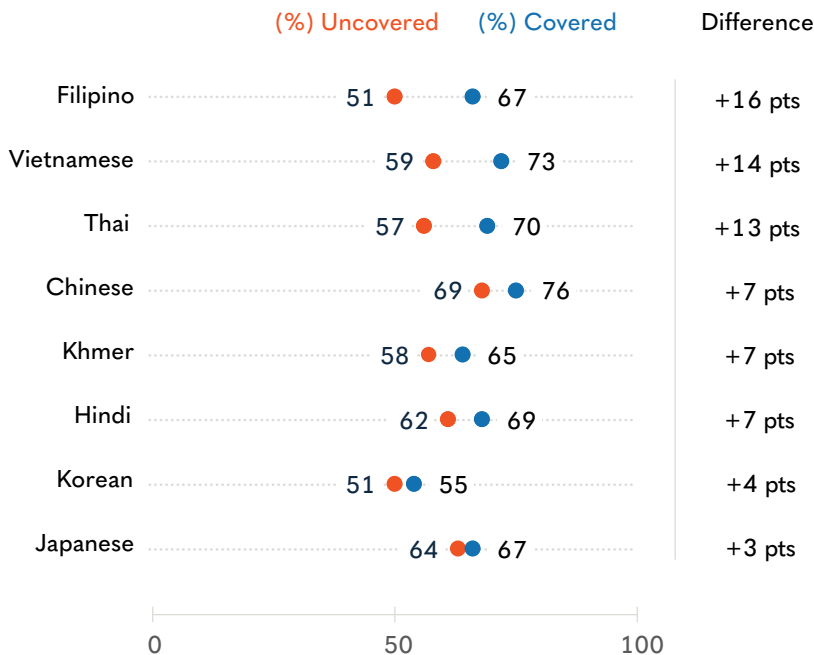
Korean (+4 points) and Japanese (+3 points) language groups had more modest increases. Spanish-language groups in counties covered by Section 14201 had an estimated turnout rate of 54 percent, though too few Spanish speakers lived in uncovered counties to produce a reliable estimate of the comparison group.



Where California law required translated sample ballots, those with limited English proficiency voted at higher rates than in counties without mandated coverage.

Results are among those who told state or local officials that they preferred materials in a non-English language.

County Voter Turnout



Note: Language groups shown are those with a large enough sample size to create estimated voter turnout rates for 2020. Voter turnout is among registered voters.

Source: "Assessing Multilingual Language Material Usage and Impact Through Administrative Data," SSRN Working Paper No. 5772603.

# Limitations

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**The findings summarized above present a strong case for expansive language assistance. There are some limitations inherent in the data, however, and further research is warranted.**

The study we relied on for this policy brief relies on administrative data from a single election (2020) and so cannot, by itself, definitively show that language assistance causes higher turnout. Rather, it documents strong associations between coverage, use of multi-lingual materials, and participation among LEP voters.

Additionally, language coverage under federal Section 203 and California Section 14201 is triggered by population-based thresholds. As a result, counties and precincts that receive language assistance systematically differ from non-covered areas in the size and concentration of their language group populations. This makes it difficult to fully separate the effects of language assistance from other factors associated with the size and makeup of various language groups.

Finally, the analysis relies on constructed indicators of race and ethnicity, language group, and LEP status from the California voter file and Census tabulations, and all results are specific to California's language assistance laws and election administration in 2020.

# Policy Recommendations

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**The California data strongly suggests that when people can access election information in their preferred language, they are more likely to vote and have their voices heard.**

This demonstrates that providing language assistance is more than a symbolic gesture. At the same time, the study analyzed multilingual language assistance in three California counties and found differences in how it is implemented, and in how LEP voters receive and use multilingual materials across language groups.

As shown above, language groups in counties that provide election materials in multiple languages have higher request rates from LEP registered voters than those in counties that do not provide multilingual materials. Groups in counties required to offer multilingual ballot assistance have higher LEP voter turnout than those in counties without such mandates.

Additionally, the study noted that in many covered counties, language assistance is more visible and comprehensive: Translated and sample ballots are posted conspicuously, language assistance is advertised through multilingual voter guides and ethnic media, and bilingual poll workers and hotlines are available. This likely increases the salience and usefulness of language assistance for LEP voters.

Drawing on these patterns, along with feedback from language assistance advocates and the California Language Access Working Group, Dēmos and the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund make the following recommendations to help other states strengthen the impact of their own language assistance programs.

We recommend jurisdictions implement the following:

## LANGUAGES

Expand multilingual ballot assistance to more languages, not just those that meet the definition of a “language minority” under federal standards, which currently cover only Spanish, Asian languages, and American Indian and Alaska Native languages under Section 203.

## MAIL

Automatically mail translated ballot materials and official ballots to each voter based on the stated language preference on their voter registration form.

If providing sample ballots, they should be true facsimiles and not composite ballots, which can confuse voters because they combine different electoral races into a single sample ballot.

## TRANSLATIONS

Ensure high-quality oral and written translation services:

- Provide translated votable ballots in all languages that meet the population thresholds under state or federal law. At a minimum, sample ballots should be provided in all such languages.
- Provide an opportunity for community groups to publicly review and comment on the accuracy of all translations.
- Provide in-person recruitment and training for interpreters and translators.
- Prioritize oral translation and interpretation services, with interpretation hotlines available as backup.



## INTERPRETER TRAINING

Train interpreters to watch out for and approach community members who are not aware of language services.

## POLL WORKER TRAINING

Train poll workers on how to ensure that anyone who wants a multilingual ballot or oral translation assistance can get it.

## SIGNAGE

Make the availability of multilingual ballot materials and oral translation services prominent and visible at polling locations.

## COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Designate a county language assistance coordinator or group as a point of contact for community questions and concerns.

## OUTREACH

Fund year-round community outreach and engagement with language-minority communities.

Finally, as shown above, language preference data drawn from voter registration forms provides critical insights into the effectiveness of language assistance policies. We recommend that all states collect language preference data on voter registration forms, regardless of whether the language a voter chooses is covered by any language assistance law. This will enable officials and advocates to better target and evaluate language assistance programs.

Ultimately, California's language assistance infrastructure is a helpful model for other states and the federal government in expanding access to the ballot, and the lessons drawn from this study can inform efforts to further improve that model.

- 1 The study draws precinct-level population counts for LEP groups from the California Statewide Database, which used a special tabulation by the California Census Disclosure Review Board.
- 2 UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Institute, "From Eligibility to the Ballot Box: Examining the Racial and Ethnic Voter Turnout Gaps in the U.S. and California," September 27, 2022, <https://latino.ucla.edu/research/voter-turnout-gaps-2020/#:~:text=Table%20%3A%20California%20Voter%20Eligibility%2C%20Registration%20and%20Turnout%20by%20Race%20and%20Ethnicity%2C%20November%202020.>