



2023 ANNUAL REPORT TO THE CALIFORNIA LEGISLATURE ON STUDENT VOTER REGISTRATION

by the California Secretary of State



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INTRODUCTION

Pursuant to the Student Voter Registration Act of 2003 (Chapter 819, Statutes of 2003), California Elections Code section 2146(d) requires the California Secretary of State to submit an annual report to the California Legislature on student voter registration statistics and the efforts undertaken by their office. The intent of this legislation is to ensure that every eligible high school and college student is provided with the opportunity to register, or pre-register, to vote in the most convenient manner possible.

BACKGROUND

The Student Voter Registration Act was passed in response to a need for students to be provided with additional opportunities to participate in civic culture. The goal was to ensure that every eligible high school and college student received a voter registration form with their diploma, allowing a meaningful opportunity to register to vote.

Between 2004 and 2007, the Secretary of State was required to send schools printed voter registration forms based solely on the number of students enrolled at every high school, California Community College (CCC), California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) campus.

Senate Bill 854 (Chapter 481, Statutes 2007), which became effective in 2008, amended Elections Code section 2146 to reduce the number of forms the Secretary of State was required to provide by limiting their distribution to voting age students only. It also permitted CCC and CSU students attending a school that operated an automated class registration system to receive a voter registration form that was pre-printed with personal information relevant for voter registration during the class registration process, which further reduced the number of forms the Secretary of State was required to provide to schools. In 2008 alone, the Secretary of State's office printed and mailed over 2.5 million student voter registration applications to high school and college campuses. Of the over 2.5 million student voter registration applications mailed, less than one percent were completed and returned to the Secretary of State. This approach was deemed costly and ineffective.

In 2014, the law was further amended by Assembly Bill 1446 (Chapter 593, Statutes of 2014), which required every high school, CCC and CSU campus to designate a contact person, and provide their contact information to the Secretary of State to facilitate the distribution of paper voter registration forms. It also permitted paper registration forms to be provided to schools in the quantity requested by the campus and encouraged students to register to vote online.

Online Voter Registration

In 2009, the Secretary of State launched an online voter registration form that students attending a CCC or CSU could fill out, print, and sign. The signed form could then be mailed directly to their respective county elections office.

In 2012, the Secretary of State implemented California's Online Voter Registration system (COVR), which allows applicants to submit a completed and signed voter registration form electronically if they have a signature on file with the Department of Motor Vehicles.

The Secretary of State was able to provide unique URLs to each high school and college campus after launch of COVR. Schools were encouraged to place a hyperlink containing the unique URL on their campus websites. The hyperlink directs students to the COVR application at RegisterToVote.ca.gov, offering them easy access to voter registration forms.

National Voter Registration Act

In 1993, Congress enacted the National Voter Registration Act (also known as the "NVRA" and the "Motor Voter Act"). The goal of the NVRA is to make it easier for all Americans to register to vote, particularly those in underserved and disabled communities. In 2018, the Secretary of State designated all California Community Colleges (CCC), California State Universities (CSU) and University of California (UC) campus offices for students with disabilities as NVRA agencies. As designated voter registration agencies, staff at these offices provide students with disabilities the opportunity to register to vote at the time of application for services, renewal of services, or notification of a change in address.

Pre-Registration

In September 2016, Senate Bill 113 (Chapter 619, Statutes of 2014) went into effect, permitting pre-registration for 16- and 17-year-olds. Pre-registrants are automatically converted to registered voters on their 18th birthday. In March 2017, pre-registration was also made available through [COVR](#), expanding access to additional students.

VOTER OUTREACH EFFORTS

The California Secretary of State (SOS) encourages high school students to pre-register and college students to register to vote through various outreach efforts, including social media. Over the last year, the SOS partnered with high schools, colleges, and universities across the state to support civic engagement efforts on campuses. The SOS outreach staff participated in nearly 60 virtual and in-person events in addition to meeting with county elections officials, higher education administrators and student groups, and advocates to discuss collaborative efforts around youth voter education.

Student Voter Registration Project

Each year, the Student Voter Registration Project (SVRP) begins with the SOS contacting all high schools, community colleges, CSUs, UCs, and private colleges throughout the state. A letter is mailed to each institution that includes a voter registration card order form and a reminder of the school's responsibilities under Elections Code section 2146(d). The letter

also highlights key election and voter registration dates as well as voter outreach and engagement opportunities. Schools are asked to submit a response which includes:

- Contact information for the staff voter registration coordinator on campus; and/or
- The website address where the school posts a hyperlink to the online voter registration form on their webpage; and/or
- A voter registration form order if they would like to receive paper forms in any of the 10 languages available.

The SOS processes the responses received and distributes voter registration forms to the schools that request them.

California Students Vote Project

Established in 2016, the California Secretary of State Students Vote Project (SVP) is a statewide nonpartisan program that elevates college student voices and promotes civic engagement efforts to build a more inclusive democracy. In 2019, the Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act ([California Education Code §66850-66852](#); [California Elections Code §2148.5](#)) was enacted to give California colleges and universities the necessary tools to increase civic engagement and participation among young voters. The SVP was expanded to support and ensure implementation of this law.

In 2023, the SVP focused on civic engagement through resource creation, quarterly meetings, award ceremonies, office hours, tabling, and strategic partnerships with higher education institutions. Civic and election resources were also created to assist higher education campuses, faculty, and students with the voting process for voter education and implementation of the Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act (SCVEA).

The SVP focused on promoting civic participation by creating comprehensive resources, hosting regular events, and engaging directly with colleges and organizations. User-friendly resources were developed, such as the *Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Implementation Guide* and the *Civic and Voter Empowerment Action Plan Guidelines*. The strategic partnerships that were strengthened with higher education systems, student organizations and individual campuses emphasized the SVP's dedication to collaboration.

California University and College Ballot Bowl

In 2018, SVP developed the first California University and College Ballot Bowl competition. SVP hosts the California University and College Ballot Bowl only during election years prior to the statewide general election. The Ballot Bowl is a friendly competition where all California higher education systems can compete to register the most students to vote. The next Ballot Bowl Competition will commence on August 12, 2024, and conclude on November 5, 2024, the date of the presidential general election.

The SVP is required to produce a report to the State Legislature. To view current and past reports, visit <https://www.sos.ca.gov/administration/agency-reports/svp-agency-reports>.

High School Voter Education Weeks

California Education Code section 49040(a) designates the last two full weeks of April and September as “High School Voter Education Weeks.” In partnership with the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Secretary of State issues a joint letter which encourages high school administrators, staff, and students to host voter registration drives and to participate in educational events all year but especially during these four weeks.

This year, the SOS visited high schools and colleges across the state, holding in-person voter education forums and attending college fairs. The SOS also encouraged eligible high school students to engage in the election process by serving as poll workers and celebrating civic holidays such as Poll Worker Recruitment Day. The SOS has created targeted outreach material to support civic engagement participation and shared these materials with high school campuses.

Student Mock Election

The SOS, along with the California Department of Education’s Superintendent of Public Instruction, promotes the California Student Mock Election prior to statewide general elections. The next Student Mock Election will take place on October 8, 2024. This event provides high school and middle school students firsthand experience with the electoral process by giving them the opportunity to review election materials and cast a “mock” ballot for the candidates and issues important to them and their families. The SOS will continue this outreach effort, as it has been beneficial for promoting voter engagement and civic learning with students.

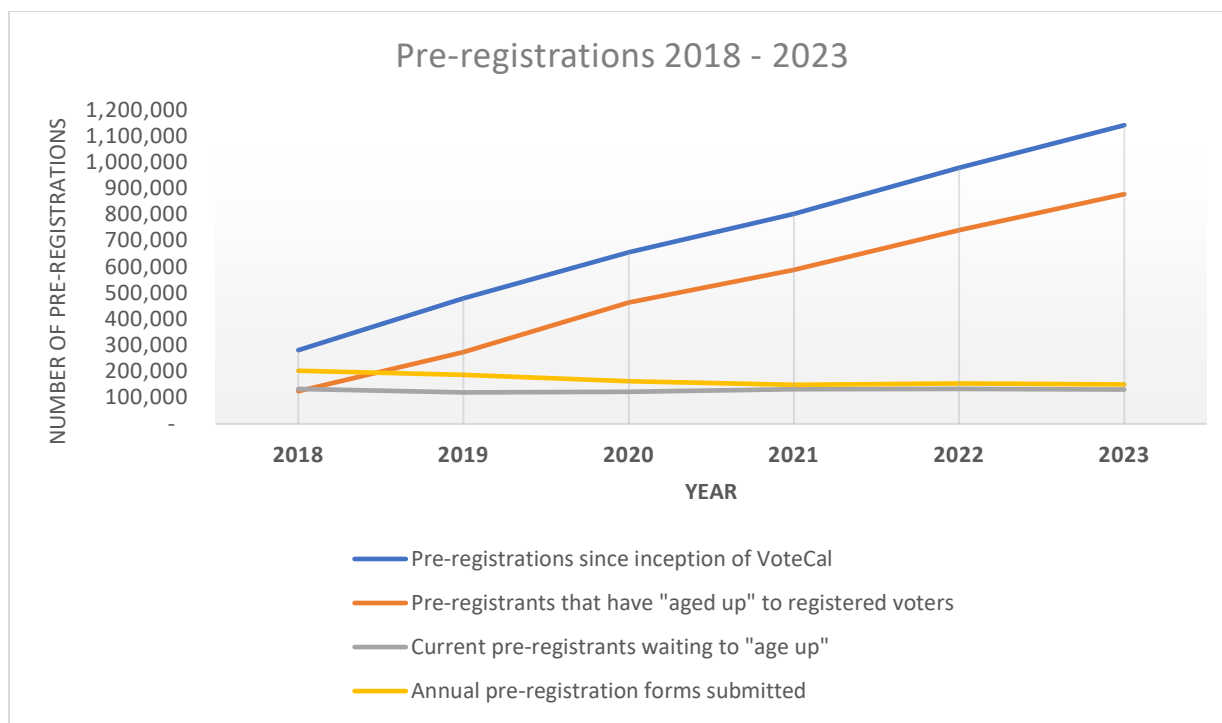
2023 RESULTS

Trackable Student Registrations

The data in this report include only those student voter registrations that are trackable. Student voter registrations that can be tracked include: 1) paper voter registration cards the SOS has provided to schools for which affidavit numbers are directly associated with student registrations, and 2) online voter registration links with unique URLs assigned to schools that make them accessible via college class registration databases. This does not include registrations or pre-registrations submitted to VoteCal through external registration systems or tools outside of COVR, such as Turbo Vote, Democracy Works, or the California Voter Foundation. These cannot be tracked as the types of organizations do not request that registrants identify themselves as students, and they are not associated with a particular school. For similar reasons, voter registrations captured through NVRA agencies, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles and other social services agencies, are not captured in this report.

Student Pre-Registration

Since pre-registration began in 2016, a total of 1,141,476 students have pre-registered to vote. Of these, 877,917 have since turned 18 and are now registered to vote. The chart below depicts pre-registration statistics by year, from 2018 through 2023. While the number of pre-registrants waiting to turn 18 remains fairly consistent across the period, the number of pre-registration forms submitted each year declined by 27% from 2018-2021. California Motor Voter went live in April 2018, at which point 16- and 17- year- olds were automatically pre-registered to vote when they applied for a driver license at the Department of Motor Vehicles, which included a larger pool of eligible pre-registrants than in the following years. COVID had a negative impact on pre-registrations with students enrolled in distance learning in 2020 and 2021, which did not allow for the usual on-campus events that schools hold to promote civic engagement and voter registration, including tabling, rallies, mock elections, and other related activities. With students now back on campus, a rebound in pre-registrations is anticipated leading up to the 2024 Presidential Election cycle. A decline in pre-registrations is also typically seen in non-election years due to the lack of publicity and excitement that occurs with each election cycle. An increase in student civic engagement is also anticipated as a result of the passage of Senate Bill 955, which became effective in 2023 and provides one excused absence to allow high school students to serve as a member of a precinct board or to act as a poll worker, which in turn encourages them to pre-register to vote.



	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Cumulative total of pre-registrations since tracking began in 2017	281,551	479,821	656,077	802,731	979,081	1,141,476
Pre-registrants that have "aged up" to registered voters	124,756	274,667	463,536	588,847	740,329	877,917
Current pre-registrants waiting to "age up"	133,336	120,102	122,751	132,350	132,928	131,394
Annual pre-registration forms submitted	202,948	187,407	162,344	149,147	153,990	150,120

Online Voter Registration Forms

The table below lists online voter registration statistics by year from 2018 through 2023. With the convenience of online registration, a steady increase in the number of online forms submitted annually was anticipated. However, the data shows an overall decline in online registrations since 2018 with two notable exceptions:

- 2020 shows a dramatic increase in online student registrations. The increase was in part due to 2020 being a presidential election year, with an exceptionally engaging presidential contest, in which an overall increase in voter registration is to be expected. Another factor contributing to the increase in online registrations was likely due to school facilities being closed during the pandemic and a majority of students attending classes online. In addition, in-person events were either limited or discouraged for health and safety reasons. Therefore, the best option for students to register was online.
- 2022 also saw a spike in online student voter registrations although not at the same level as 2020. 2022 was a statewide election year, and an increase in voter interest

was anticipated, but not at the same level of presidential contests. In addition, schools were returning to on-campus attendance, with students still enrolled in distance learning more likely to choose to register online.

Completed Online Voter Registration Forms*						
System	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018
California Community College	548	7,547	715	46,718	933	1,787
California State University	1,791	7,653	2,072	31,813	1,174	5,865
University of California	384	4,738	395	14,067	197	888
Private Colleges	277	3,626	696	14,288	16	179
No school identified	511	12,910	679	65,991	73	168
Total Number of Students	3,511	36,474	4,557	172,877	2,393	8,887

*Online voter registration statistics for years 2018 through 2022 have been adjusted within this report to correct errors reported in prior years. In previous reports, pre-registrations were included, and in 2021 and 2022, registrations were overstated due to double-counting registrations from students that registered using voter registration forms distributed as part of the Ballot Bowl contest. 2018 through 2022 included pre-registrations which have since been removed.

Paper Voter Registration Forms

In 2023, the SOS contacted 4,256 high schools, and 340 colleges and universities through the Student Voter Registration Project (SVRP). A total of 642 schools responded to the mailing, which represents a 14% response rate, despite being required by Elections Code section 2148 (a). Of the schools that responded, 450 requested paper voter registration forms, representing 10% of the total number of schools contacted.

The SVRP Statistics table below lists the response rates from schools from 2018 through 2023. There was a significant decline in the number of schools that responded to the SOS mailing in 2020. This decline was likely due to the closure of school facilities as a result of the worldwide pandemic. Since 2020, the number of schools that responded to SOS mailings has shown a steady increase as students return to campus. The percentage of schools that responded to the SOS mailing in 2022 with requests for voter registration forms was 7%. However, in 2023, we saw a slight increase showing that 10% of schools submitted responses. Interestingly, the percentage of schools responding is higher in non-election years than it is in years when a statewide election is held. Since voter registrations trend up in statewide election years, one possible reason for the lower response rate is that schools continue to have existing supplies ordered in prior years.

SVRP Statistics	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018
Letters Sent	4,596	5,012	2,388	2,332	2,335	1,989
Schools Responding	642	390	329	188	446	1,113
Response Rate	14%	8%	14%	8%	19%	56%
Schools that Requested VRCs	450	330	258	138	352	825
VRC Request Rate	10%	7%	11%	6%	15%	41%

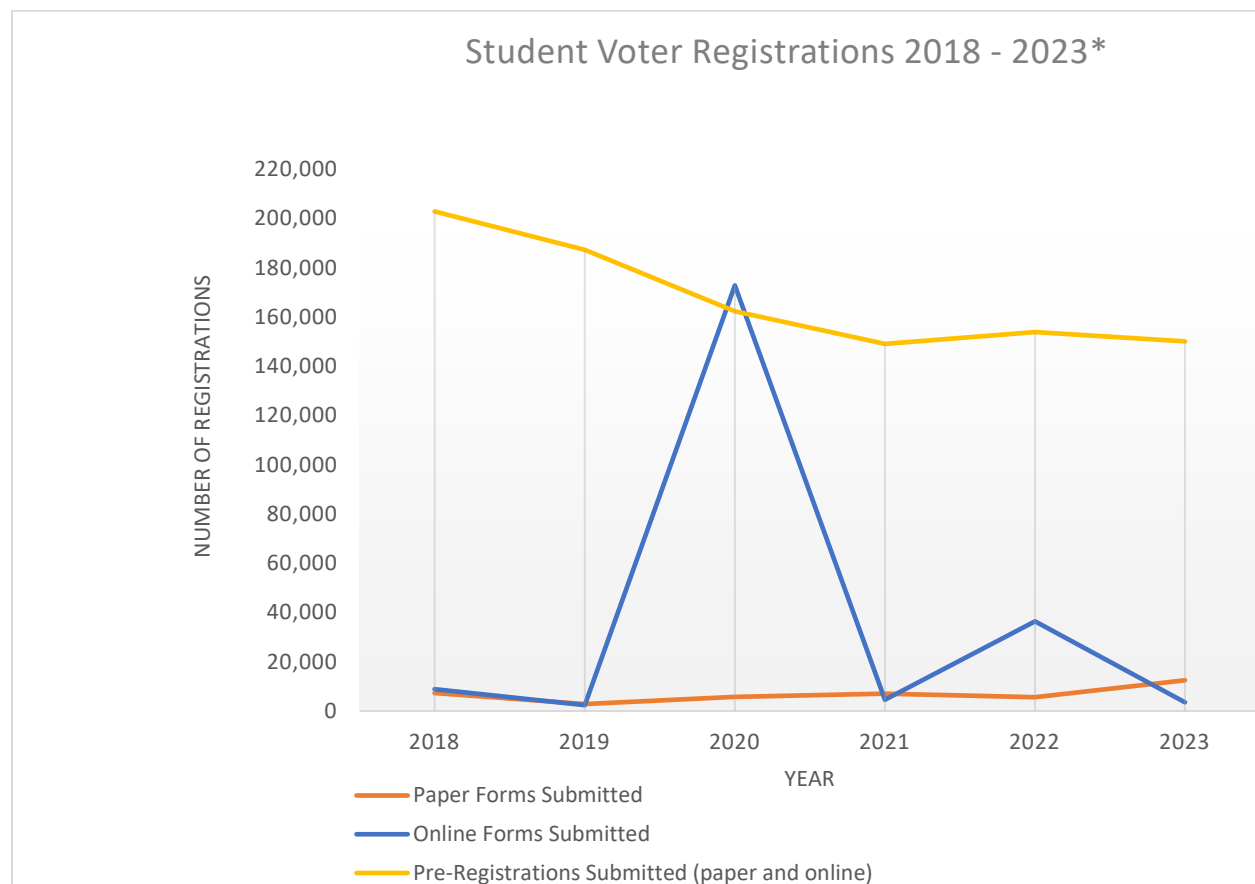
While the number of schools that responded and requested paper voter registration forms in 2023 increased by 36% compared to 2022, the quantity of forms requested by the schools increased by 63% in 2023. There are numerous reasons for this significant increase, including voter registration drives where paper is the preferred method of registration. Many voter outreach efforts have moved back into the public sphere with the waning COVID pandemic. This shift has permitted additional gatherings that are conducive to in-person registration events, particularly within student campus settings. As shown in the table below, the number of registrations received in 2023 jumped by 122% when compared to 2022.

Number of Paper Student Voter Registration Forms Distributed & Returned						
System	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018
High Schools	96,814	50,887	69,296	36,222	73,045	159,914
Community Colleges	38,080	30,680	35,035	1,810	24,465	24,650
CSU campuses	5,224	4,280	8,345	11,700	1,705	8,300
UC campuses	0	1,700	1,160	550	1,500	9,100
Private Colleges	9,045	4,157	950	7,600	960	5,725
Total Distributed	149,163	91,704	114,786	57,882	101,675	207,689
% Change in Distributed	63%	-20%	98%	-43%	-51%	-
Total Returned	12,489	5,624	7,000	5,726	2,847	7,280
% Returned	8%	6%	6%	10%	3%	4%

Combined Student Registration Results

The chart below lists student voter registrations by registration method from 2018 to 2023. There was a large spike in both overall registrations and online registrations in 2020, due to the highly engaging 2020 Presidential Election coupled with school closures because of the COVID pandemic. A smaller spike in online and pre-registrations can be seen in 2022, when there was a statewide election. These results are as anticipated and follow the general trend of increased student voter registration in years when there is a statewide election.

In 2023, there were 166,120 student registrations recorded from all sources, including paper forms, online forms, and pre-registrations. The 2023 total represents a 15% decline from 2022, and a 3% increase over 2021, the most recent non-statewide election year.



Student Voter Registrations	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Paper Forms Submitted	7,280	2,847	5,726	7,000	5,624	12,489
Online Forms Submitted	8,887	2,393	172,877	4,557	36,474	3,511
Pre-Registrations Submitted (paper and online)	202,948	187,407	162,344	149,147	153,990	150,120
Total Student Registrations	219,115	192,647	340,947	160,704	196,088	166,120
Change from prior year	-	-12%	77%	-53%	22%	-15%

*Online voter registration statistics for years 2018 through 2022 have been adjusted with this report to correct errors reported in prior years. In previous reports, pre-registrations were included, and in 2021 and 2022, registrations were overstated due to double-counting registrations from students that registered using voter registration forms distributed as part of the Ballot Bowl contest. 2018 through 2022 included pre-registrations which have since been removed.

SUMMARY

Outreach to the student population through direct contact with the schools, student leaders and partners, as well as through social media, continues to be a part of the SOS' student voter registration efforts.

In following with past trend data, student registration levels continue to be higher in election years. Registration data shows significant increases in the number of students who registered to vote during 2020, a presidential election year that was very engaging for many voters. We also saw moderate increases in 2022, which was also a statewide election year. In non-statewide election years, lower student registration rates are common, including the current year of 2023. We expect to see the registration rates rise again in the upcoming year with the presidential election cycle of 2024.

The COVID pandemic had a significant impact on the way students registered to vote, with a dramatic increase in online registrations during 2020 when schools were closed for in-person events and students were attending classes remotely. It also impacted pre-registration rates. While colleges offered students the opportunity to register to vote during online enrollment, high schools conducted the majority of their voter registration efforts in person. 2023 saw an increase in the number of paper forms used to register to vote as students have returned to campus, and on-campus voter registration events have resumed.

The percentage of schools that responded to SOS outreach as part of the SVRP during 2023 has increased over 2022, but it remains low at 14% of schools contacted despite it being required by California Elections Code. While the number of paper voter registration forms submitted during 2023 has increased significantly over 2022, the percentage of forms returned remains below 10%. The SOS will continue to evaluate the costs and benefits of contacting all schools by annual mailings as part of SVRP.