

INNOVATIONS IN VOTER EDUCATION

How Philanthropy
Joined with
San Mateo and
Yolo Counties
to Support
Local Nonprofits
and Ramp Up
Election Outreach

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2024, San Mateo and Yolo County elections offices partnered with local foundations to educate voters about new voting practices under the California Voter's Choice Act and expand voter outreach. Harnessing county and private philanthropic funding, the partners made short-term grants to community-based organizations for voter education and engagement, particularly among historically under-represented populations. This innovative effort worked. With minimal investment, counties educated more voters and saw increased civic participation. Grantees' culturally competent approaches clearly connected with voters and demonstrated that community-based outreach is an efficient, effective model that deserves replication.



Image credit: Youth Community Service

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Over \$529,000 in grants** were awarded across both counties.
- **28 community organizations participated:** 19 in San Mateo County and 9 in Yolo County.
- Voter **outreach prioritized equity and inclusion**, primarily reaching youth, non-English speakers, and under-represented communities of color. Outreach efforts were conducted by organizations with existing relationships and expertise in these target communities, including organizations that distribute food and other direct services, housing organizations, media entities, and advocacy groups.
- Grantees **contacted more than 135,000 individuals** through canvassing, phone banking, outreach activities, and written communications.
- Grantees created unique content and generated at least **200,000 targeted media impressions**.

KEY OUTCOMES

- **Grantees reached large volumes of voters**, primarily from communities with low voter turnout rates.
- The grants program likely contributed to **higher-than-expected voter participation in targeted communities**.
- Through positive personal interactions, event attendance, and social media engagement, **voters demonstrated interest** in grantees' efforts.
- Grantee strategies and materials **added value to the counties' outreach efforts**, demonstrating grantees' cultural competence, relationships, and creativity.
- Election officials and nonprofits **established lasting collaborations** and increased their respective outreach capacities.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- This efficient and effective approach **should be replicated in other California counties.**
- **Sustained funding, ideally from the state government,** is needed to scale the model statewide.
- Grants for these types of campaigns should be approved **at least three to four months before an election** to allow for adequate planning and collaboration.
- **Clearer guidance to grantees** and streamlined approval of materials could reduce confusion and delays.
- **More intentional collaboration and joint planning** among grantees could result in more efficient campaigns that reach a greater number of voters.

FULL ANALYSIS

These innovative funding programs in San Mateo and Yolo Counties aimed to improve voter engagement, and, as evidenced here, they worked. The programs demonstrated that partnerships among counties, foundations, and community-based organizations **can enhance equitable voter participation while efficiently extending public resources.** The two initiatives also highlighted the **importance of culturally relevant, trusted messengers** in effective civic engagement.

Based largely on interviews with participants, this report explores in greater depth how the funds worked, the activities grantees conducted, the benefits and impacts participants observed, and challenges they experienced. Participants offered numerous recommendations detailed in the following report and in two companion briefs designed for election administrators and funders. The companion briefs also outline process steps and other implementation tips for those interested in initiating voter education grants programs in their communities.

INTRODUCTION



Two counties launched a novel experiment

In 2024, election officials in San Mateo and Yolo counties offered unique voter outreach and education programs that were firmly rooted within their respective communities. Leveraging their own budgets and supplemental funding from philanthropic foundations, officials provided monetary grants and assistance to local nonprofits and media partners to educate their constituents about new voting practices stemming from California's Voter's Choice Act. The groups conducted creative, engaging, multi-lingual education campaigns, designed to connect authentically to audiences they know well.

The groups' efforts built on existing activities and relationships and reached sizable populations with limited resources. Receiving a combined \$406,600 in grants in the 2024 primary and general election cycles, 19 organizations participated in the San Mateo County Voter Engagement Fund. Meanwhile, nine nonprofits utilized \$122,539 from the Yolo Voter Education Grants. Together the groups contacted more than 135,000 potential voters through canvassing, community events, and mailings and made at least 200,000¹ targeted media impressions with messages about how, when, and where to vote.

Three sectors partnered to leverage their respective expertise, and each benefited in unique ways

Election officials brought the expertise and gravitas of their offices, anchoring the work of grantees with strong knowledge of the electorate and accurate information about voting. Ultimately, they found that the funds extended the capacity of their own outreach efforts by providing meaningful engagement and tailored messages to voters who are often hard to reach. Yolo County Chief Elections Officer Jesse Salinas said, "Our goal is to welcome all who want to vote, and our community partners have the networks that help us reach all such potential voters."

Participating nonprofits marshaled deep relationships and knowledge of their communities to pave new inroads for voter education. A diverse set of grantees welcomed the opportunity to engage their communities in civic participation, partner with elections offices, and contribute to a healthy democracy. Many also were grateful for the opportunity to pay staff and organizers for work that often goes unpaid. Several grantees recruited high school students and other young people for this work by paying them to canvass and phone bank, which served the dual mission of engaging future voters.

Local philanthropic institutions were critical participants in the grantmaking programs. Silicon Valley Community Foundation (SVCF) and Yolo Community Foundation (YCF) selected the grantees, administered the grants, coordinated training, and monitored outcomes. Additionally, the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund (Haas Jr.) provided \$135,000 in funding and helped establish the effort, particularly in Yolo County. These mutually beneficial partnerships minimized the administrative burden for election officials and leveraged the foundations' grantmaking infrastructure and familiarity with local nonprofits. They also generated new grantee relationships, strengthened ties to county governments, and sharpened their philanthropic strategies.

¹ Grantees provided limited data about media impressions. The data made available for this report suggest that grantees made at least 100,000 media impressions in each county, though that number is likely much higher.



Image credit: Youth Community Service

The programs achieved their goals

The partners aimed to create a better voting experience, including ensuring that historically under-represented populations are engaged; that voters know how, when, and where to cast a ballot securely; and that mandates for language services were met. A number of indicators suggest that the grantmaking programs achieved these and other goals, including strengthening civic engagement and deepening relationships between diverse community leaders and county elections offices. While increasing voter turnout was not an explicit goal of the programs, data suggest that San Mateo and Yolo County voters were more likely to participate in the 2024 elections as a result of these grantmaking programs.

ORIGINS OF THE FUNDING PROGRAMS

New voting practices under the Voter's Choice Act necessitated voter education

In the 29 California counties that adopted the provisions of the state's Voter's Choice Act (VCA) between its passage in 2016 and the 2024 elections, voting practices have changed dramatically. Now, fully 78% of California voters reside in counties implementing the new practices, which include providing vote-by-mail ballots to all voters.² Participating counties have replaced traditional neighborhood polling places open only on Election Day with a considerably smaller number of vote centers where voters may cast a ballot for up to 10 days before an election. The VCA also requires counties to collaborate with community-based organizations as they develop their election administration plans, which outline where vote centers and drop-off sites will be located, plans for voter outreach and education, as well as plans for language and disability access.

As experts in the communities they serve and organizations that are trusted by potential voters, local nonprofits can play critical roles both in advising counties on how to administer their outreach programs and in educating voters directly. Jessica Hubbard of YCF explains, "Local nonprofits have deep knowledge and relationships in the communities they serve and already have communications channels in place—like newsletters and events—so they are very efficient at delivering the message to the target audience." However, those same community groups that may know voters best can also face myriad barriers to participating in these efforts. Many lack the funding and staff capacity to conduct intensive outreach, are not experts in election administration, and may not have not been engaged as partners by elections offices.³

San Mateo County pioneered the approach in 2020

As one of the first five counties to adopt VCA in advance of the 2018 elections, San Mateo County began testing new strategies to teach voters about the shift in 2017. Based on concerns about the limitations of traditional mailings, posting information online, and hosting sparsely-attended meetings, the county's chief elections officer, Mark Church, prioritized partnering directly with community leaders to get the word out. He said, "When you don't go where the voters are, you overlook one of the most important avenues of engagement. We want to use trusted messengers to go where the people are. You don't have to come to us, we go to you."

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Mark Church
Chief Elections Officer
San Mateo County



Image credit: Youth Community Service

² Romero, M. (2025, March 26). California's Voter Participation Gap: Strategies to Promote Engagement & Representation [Webinar]. Retrieved from <https://lwc.org/event/voter-participation-gap-webinar/>.

³ Romero, M. (2024, May 28). Revisiting California's Election Reforms: How do Community Organizing Efforts Navigate the State's Election System to Reach New Voters [Webinar]. Retrieved from <https://cid.usc.edu/events>.

Responding to requests from local advocates, Church and the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors designated \$150,000 of the county's outreach budget for each of the 2020 elections (primary and general election) to be redirected to community-based organizations to fund their participation in voter outreach. Church recruited Silicon Valley Community Foundation to administer the grants and officially launched the San Mateo County Voter Engagement Fund. He reprised the fund for the 2022 and 2024 cycles. For each primary and general election, SVCF has used \$18,000 from the county to administer the fund and regranted the remainder of the \$150,000 budget to community organizations. In 2024, SVCF contributed its own resources for each election (\$46,300). Grants from Haas Jr. (\$25,000 for each election) brought the grand total available to grantees in each election that year to \$203,300.

Yolo County piloted the approach in 2024 and developed corresponding apps

Inspired by the success of San Mateo County's fund, Yolo County's chief elections officer, Jesse Salinas, launched a similar project in advance of the 2024 elections, the Yolo Voter Education Grants program. Raúl Macías, democracy program director at Haas, Jr., encouraged the effort and offered \$50,000 to be regranted to Yolo County nonprofits over the two elections, plus coverage of administrative costs. Salinas matched the foundation's investment by securing \$25,000 in county funds for each election. The duo recruited the Yolo Community Foundation to administer the grants. Salinas also engaged county staff to develop mobile- and web-based apps that would help grantee partners target potential voters and report their work back to the county.

THE PROGRAM MODEL



Image credit: Youth Community Service

The grants targeted hard-to-reach communities

The top priority for both funds was increasing voter participation among communities with historically lower turnout rates. Such targeted outreach is critical because infrequent voters are typically not prioritized by political campaigns and therefore “receive less information about candidates and ballot initiatives.”⁴ Salinas said, “We try to focus on folks who are on the margins, that are struggling.” He added, “It’s a hard group to engage because they don’t see how their everyday existence can be changed by voting.” Yolo County’s grant program placed particular emphasis on Latinx, Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, youth, and voters residing in precincts with low turnout rates. Additionally, the county identified low-turnout precincts for grantees to aid their targeting.

Also prioritizing equity, San Mateo County election officials targeted outreach to voters who primarily speak languages other than English, people with disabilities, and voters who are incarcerated or housing insecure. Additionally, the county identified the 20% of precincts with the lowest voter turnout and shared those lists with SVCF to aid in grantee selection and program design. Grantees were fully empowered to decide which populations and precincts to target, though their strategies were informed by information each county supplied. Some grantees requested county assistance refining their targets, such as identifying specific streets to canvass. Many grounded their work in their expertise and relationships within specific ethnic communities, their track record of serving a designated clientele, or skills communicating in specific languages.

⁴ Shellenberger, L. & Romero, M. (2023). The Voter’s Choice Act: Impact Analysis and Recommendations. https://selc.senate.ca.gov/sites/selc.senate.ca.gov/files/VCA_Impact_Report_October_2023.pdf.

The foundations selected grantees and determined grant sizes

SVCF and YCF assumed full responsibility for administering the grants, including recruiting applicants, selecting grantees, issuing checks, and monitoring grantee activities, while reporting regularly to county elections offices. Grantees were required to be 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations with experience reaching and serving diverse populations. In addition to many culturally-based and civic organizations, grantees included local food banks, an affordable housing provider, and media organizations. They needed to demonstrate a “cohesive strategy for reaching communities with lower voter participation,” according to YCF’s Jessica Hubbard. Additionally, the foundations were aiming to select a diverse cohort of grantees that collectively reached a wide range of voters, demographically and geographically, while employing multiple outreach approaches. Foundation staff assessed proposals for alignment with their criteria, with YCF inviting staff from the county elections office and Haas Jr. to serve on an advisory application review panel.

Proposal processes varied slightly between the two counties, though both San Mateo and Yolo used simple applications and funded as many grants as possible. In San Mateo County, SVCF funded 16 out of 20 applicants in the primary cycle, while 16 out of 18 received funding to educate voters in the general election. YCF piloted its primary election program with three non-competitive grants to organizations the foundation approached. In the general election, YCF required applications, receiving 16. Ultimately YCF made eight general election grants; seven were for voter outreach and education activities and a supplementary grant went to the Yolo Food Bank to design and print materials for the full grantee cohort. Additionally, Empower Yolo had funds left over from its primary election grant enabling the organization to conduct voter education in the general election without a second grant.

Each county elections office provided funding that supported grants in the primary and general election cycles. In total, **San Mateo County appropriated \$300,000** for its grants program. Yolo County, which has about 30% as many voters as San Mateo County, **contributed \$50,000** across the two elections. **Haas Jr. supported outreach with grants totaling \$50,000 in each county, while also providing nearly \$35,000** to cover the administrative costs of the Yolo Community Foundation and the design and printing of materials grantees used in Yolo County. Additionally, **Silicon Valley Community Foundation supplemented** the grantmaking budgets in San Mateo County **with \$92,600** in grant support.

Ultimately, nonprofits in San Mateo County received \$203,300 in grants in each cycle. Organizations in Yolo County received more than \$23,000 in advance of the primary election. For the general election, Yolo County nonprofits received \$84,000 in grants and another \$15,000 to print voter education materials. **The average amount each grantee received in each election was \$13,116 in San Mateo County and \$10,754 in Yolo County.** Most grantees found their grant sizes sufficient, especially if they were incorporating voting-related messaging into existing activities. However, some required supplement grants from other funders to complete their voter education projects, especially if they needed to hire canvassers and other staff.

SAN MATEO COUNTY FUNDING SOURCES & GRANTS

Source of funds	Amount	Purpose
San Mateo County Registrar of Voters	\$150,000	Primary election grants
Haas, Jr. Fund	\$25,000	Primary election grants
Silicon Valley Community Foundation	\$46,300	Primary election grants
San Mateo County Registrar of Voters	\$150,000	General election grants
Haas, Jr. Fund	\$25,000	General election grants
Silicon Valley Community Foundation	\$46,300	General election grants
Total budget for San Mateo County grants program	\$442,600	

Grantee organization	Primary grant	General grant
Casa Circulo Cultural	\$10,000	\$14,300
El Concilio of San Mateo County	\$0	\$7,700
HealthWays	\$10,000	\$10,000
Immigration Institute of the Bay Area	\$13,500	\$15,000
League of Women Voters of South San Mateo County	\$3,500	\$6,300
Menlo Together	\$0	\$20,000
Network on Women in Prison (dba Legal Services for Prisoners with Children)	\$5,000	\$10,000
One East Palo Alto Neighborhood Improvement Initiative	\$15,000	\$0
Pacific Islander Community Partnership	\$10,000	\$0
Peninsula 360 Press	\$15,000	\$0
Peninsula Family Service	\$10,000	\$10,000
Pilipino Bayanihan Resource Center	\$20,000	\$20,000
Puente de la Costa Sur	\$15,000	\$13,000
Rise South City	\$15,000	\$15,000
Second Harvest of Silicon Valley	\$6,300	\$0
Services, Immigrant Rights, & Education Network (SIREN)	\$15,000	\$12,000
Thrive Alliance of Nonprofits	\$20,000	\$20,000
Youth Community Service	\$0	\$15,000
Youth Leadership Institute	\$20,000	\$15,000
Total regranted	\$203,300	\$203,300
Management fees to SVCF	\$18,000	\$18,000
Subtotals	\$221,300	\$221,300
Total for all regrants and fees	\$442,600	

YOLO COUNTY FUNDING SOURCES & GRANTS

Source of funds	Amount	Purpose
Haas, Jr. Fund	\$50,000	Primary and general election grants
Yolo County Registrar of Voter	\$25,000	Primary election grants
Yolo County Registrar of Voter	\$25,000	General election grants
Haas, Jr. Fund	\$22,500	Materials design grant and printing credits
Haas, Jr. Fund	\$12,500	Management fees to YCF
Total budget for Yolo County grants program	\$135,000	

Grantee organization	Primary grant	General grant	Printing credit
Empower Yolo	\$8,808	\$0	\$0
Winters Community Corazon	\$4,871	\$0	\$0
Yolo Food Bank	\$9,716	\$22,362	\$3,000
Davis Media Access	\$0	\$14,890	\$3,000
Meals on Wheels Yolo County	\$0	\$14,106	\$3,000
Community Housing Opportunities Corporation	\$0	\$3,786	\$1,500
YMCA of Superior California	\$0	\$8,500	\$3,000
Hui International	\$0	\$15,000	\$0
The Davis Phoenix Coalition	\$0	\$5,500	\$1,500
Management fees to YCF	\$5,000	\$7,500	\$0
Total regranted	\$23,395	\$84,144	\$15,000
Management fees to YCF	\$5,000	\$7,500	\$0
Subtotals	\$28,395	\$91,644	\$15,000
Total of all regrants and fees	\$135,039		

GRANTEE ACTIVITIES

Grantees conducted a wide range of activities and activated other community partners

Nonprofits participating in this work across the two counties conducted direct voter outreach, sponsored engaging community activities, and created culturally relevant media. Both foundations encouraged grantees to build on their existing work, rather than developing complex initiatives from scratch. Hubbard explains, “Funding just the marginal cost of adding voter education messaging to an existing activity is more efficient than funding an entirely new activity. Plus, they already have a built-in audience.” As a result, many voters encountered voting information from trusted messengers—and often in-language—as part of the fabric of their daily lives.

Grantees leveraged timely holiday events such as a Christmas Posada and a Lunar New Year celebration prior to the primary election as well as several Halloween events before the general election. For example, young people active in Palo Alto-based Youth Community Service (YCS) designed the “Nightmare on Vote Street,” a community party that drew more than 350 attendees and thousands of viewers over a livestream feed. The festive event featured a DJ, Halloween-themed activities like trunk or treat, and copious voter information. The event included a panel discussion with city council candidates answering questions written entirely by local youth. Grantees reported that interacting with community members in relaxed, joyful settings enabled them to engage voters when they had more free time, were primed for social interaction, and feeling invested in their communities.

Grantees compounded the reach of the county-funded grant programs by engaging non-grantee community partners in their outreach campaigns. For example, Services, Immigrant Rights, and Education Network (SIREN) used its grant funds to organize large-scale phone banks and neighborhood canvasses in San Mateo County and invited other community groups to participate. The Thrive Alliance of Nonprofits (Thrive Alliance, or the Alliance) shared materials it had developed for the San Mateo County grantee cohort with non-grantee organizations and trained organizations that provide housing assistance, food, and other direct services to educate their clients about voting.



Image credit: Youth Community Service



Image credit: Youth Community Service

Yolo County grantees prioritized people facing barriers to voting

In Yolo County, grantees conducted a variety of activities including: canvassing in low-turnout precincts; tabling at community events; sending thousands of mailers and texts; inserting flyers with food distribution; and creating video, radio, and social media content in multiple languages. Grantees aimed to meet potential voters where they were already congregating, such as outside of Catholic churches where members of the grantee group Davis Phoenix Coalition (DPC) tabled after Sunday mass. Organizers engaged passersby with fun activities like a bilingual flip chart featuring questions about voting, such as “What is the first day you can vote in Yolo County?” DPC’s Gloria Partida enthused, “People love flipping those charts!”

Several groups, including Empower Yolo and the YMCA of Superior California, engaged youth as voting ambassadors. The teens canvassed in neighborhoods with low voter turnout, tabled at dozens of community events, and educated their own families at parent meetings. Community Housing Opportunities Coalition (CHOC) staff dedicated 108 hours to canvassing at all 19 of its affordable housing sites, distributing 2,000 flyers and door hangers to 719 households and hosting 12 on-site events for residents.

The Yolo Food Bank and Meals on Wheels both connected with large populations of voters facing food insecurity. In addition to a robust social media campaign and texts and emails to its large subscriber base, the Yolo Food Bank distributed 18,000 flyers to clients through community events and at food distribution locations. Volunteers at the distribution sites were trained on how to engage with households when they were picking up their food and how to provide additional context about how, when, where, and why to vote. Similarly, Meals on Wheels, which develops close, trusted relationships with its clients, delivered voting information along with food three times each throughout the general election period to more than 1,000 homes. Meals on Wheels also sent clients mail and texts about voting. Given the mobility barriers many Meals on Wheels participants face, the organization emphasized the inclusive practices that can make voting more accessible under the Voter’s Choice Act that can make voting more accessible to seniors and those with disabilities.

Multi-lingual media campaigns in Yolo County had extensive reach

Davis-based Hui International, which advances the well-being of women and their families, created videos about voting in three languages: English, Spanish, and Dari. The videos ultimately garnered more than 70,000 views in a short period of time. Davis Media Access (DMA) used its grant dollars to produce videos and radio ads about voting in five languages, including Hmong and Punjabi. DMA’s radio content aired at least 19 times per day across two local stations for the month leading up to the general election, while thousands of viewers saw its voter education content on local television and social media channels.



Image credit: Hui International

Direct voter contact was a primary activity in San Mateo County

Grantee organizations in San Mateo County employed many strategies to interact personally with voters, directly connecting with 82,000 people across the two election cycles. For example, the League of Women Voters of South San Mateo County (LWV) canvassed in several neighborhoods, managed phone banks, and made presentations to hundreds of high school students. Given the condensed geography of its community, Youth Community Service (YCS) determined that door knocking was not efficient for its organization and switched to phone banking in English, Spanish, and Tongan. Using lists provided by a local immigration nonprofit, YCS called new citizens and advised them on how to cast their first ballots, a task many volunteers found “a wonderful call to make.” Pilipino Bayanihan Resource Center (PBRC) made more than 10,000 phone calls in each election cycle in English, Tagalog, and nine other languages, targeting Daly City because it is home to a large population of Pilipino-Americans. Though the cost of predictive dialers was prohibitive, PBRC did acquire lists of phone numbers from data provider PDI. The organization paid 11 callers who, using their own cell phones, conducted multiple rounds of calls and voicemails throughout the campaign to maximize direct contact.

San Mateo County grantees created catchy social media content



Image credit: Peninsula 360 Press



Image credit: One East Palo Alto Neighborhood Improvement Initiative

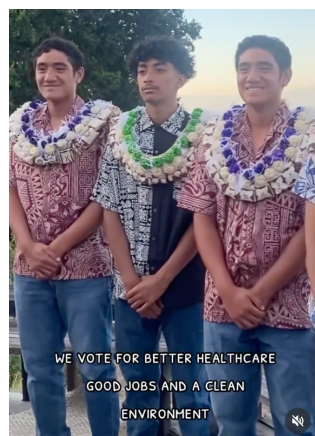


Image credit: One East Palo Alto Neighborhood Improvement Initiative

Grantees also connected with voters via social media platforms, demonstrating extensive creativity and the ability to connect authentically with historically low-turnout populations. The bilingual, multimedia organization, Peninsula 360 Press, posted a series of videos featuring its charming puppet newscaster who educated viewers in Spanish about voting. With the familiarity of a long-time friend, the puppet, Ramiro Mirón, provided facts like when voters would receive ballots, introduced them to resources like an [LWV presentation on ballot initiatives](#), and urged that “[your country needs you.](#)” In a library with a ballot drop box, the puppet adopted a [library-appropriate whisper](#) to demonstrate casting a vote-by-mail ballot, while gently teasing the puppeteer who was accidentally featured in the shot. In the week before the election, he taught viewers how to register conditionally—at a polling place after the standard voter registration period has closed—and reinforced in an [affable but urgent tone](#) that his friends in the audience need to hurry and not risk missing out on the chance to vote. Featuring a locally-known messenger whose average monthly viewership across four social media platforms exceeds 100,000, the campaign was entertaining, informative, and undoubtedly effective.

Another grantee, One East Palo Alto Neighborhood Improvement Initiative, was prolific, posting 113 videos to its social media platforms during the primary election alone. Featuring diverse youth from the community, the organization posted appealing, modern content embracing social media trends, dances, and songs. In the videos, youth [encouraged voting](#) and explained key concepts like voting [eligibility](#) and [primary elections](#). The organization also posted a video series of youth affirming in their own words why they vote and a more cinematic, uplifting piece declaring [why voting matters](#) to their community.

SUPPORT, MONITORING, AND COLLABORATION

The community foundations and counties provided guidance and guardrails

Throughout each grant period, the foundations assisted grantees with their preparation, collaboration, and reporting. Election officials articulated guardrails to ensure legality and fairness and provided information upon request. Additionally, Yolo County staff developed a mobile app that organizations could use to track their efforts and view areas where turnout was low in the 2020 general election, described further below.

Both foundations convened grantees early in the grant period to introduce county elections staff, share expectations and rules, and seed connections among grantees. Election officials emphasized the importance of providing accurate, nonpartisan information. Yolo County provided grantees with official county-produced education materials to use in their outreach efforts. Elections offices in both counties provided grantees with key information such as timelines of the voting process and locations of vote centers and ballot dropboxes, and requested that grantees not alter any factual information in their campaigns.

The Yolo County elections office requested the opportunity to approve the English-language versions of written materials that grantees created, especially the materials Yolo Food Bank designed for the entire cohort. In San Mateo County, election officials did not expect to formally approve materials created by grantees, but did ask them to ensure their materials were nonpartisan and not to frame them as official government documents. San Mateo County staff also reviewed materials developed by the Thrive Alliance and provided “loose approval” when they were presented in a meeting of the county’s Voter Education & Outreach Advisory Committee (VEOAC).

In Yolo County, grantees were prohibited from using grant funding for voter registration drives, at the request of the Haas, Jr. Fund, which is restricted by federal tax law from using grant dollars for that purpose. No such prohibition was necessary in San Mateo County as SVCF applied Haas Jr. funds only to organizations that would not be conducting voter registration activities.

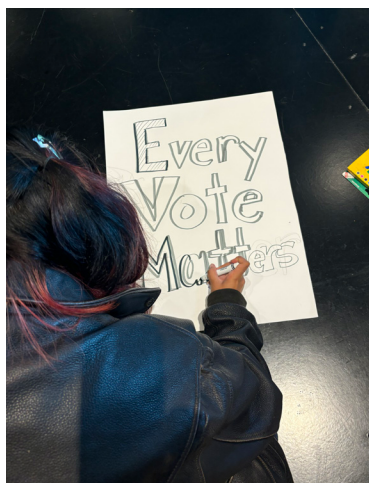


Image credit: Youth Community Service



Image credit: Youth Community Service

The foundations provided supplemental support and monitored grantee activities

Throughout the grant periods, the foundations provided opportunities for the grantees to refine and report on their work. In the general election cycle, YCF worked closely with the Yolo Food Bank to make digital and print materials available to the full grantee cohort, including coordinating payment for printed materials through a printing credit the foundation made available to each organization. SVCF hosted an open call every week so grantees could provide updates on their activities, enlist potential partners, and ask technical questions.

Aiming to simplify the reporting process for grantees, the foundations conducted meetings at the end of the primary grant cycle where they recorded and later summarized in writing the grantees' oral reports. After the general election cycle, SVCF conducted these sessions in groups of two or three organizations, which both saved time and allowed the grantees to learn from each other. Yolo County grantees provided written reports after the general election and tracked many of their activities in real time using the app the county provided, but they were not required to provide other interim reports. In the primary cycle, SVCF collected biweekly reports from grantees via a web-based form, but the practice was deemed too onerous. For the general election, the foundation only required grantees to complete one reporting survey near the halfway mark of the grant period, in addition to participating in a post-election interview.

Elections offices also supported grantees with advice and materials

While the community foundations assumed most of the responsibility of administering the grant programs, participating county elections offices also engaged with grantees and strengthened their efforts. In San Mateo County, election officials offered grantees access to the county's voter information flyers on topics such as registration, voting timelines, and where to access ballot and voting location details. At the request of grantees, county representatives attended several of their events, including Assistant Chief Elections Officer Jim Irizarry, whose Spanish language skills were especially appreciated. Additionally, county staff learned from and advised grantees in monthly meetings of the VEOAC. In total, San Mateo County staff estimate they spent a few hours a week supporting grantees.

Yolo County officials also responded to occasional information requests from grantees and endeavored to review and approve grantee materials within 24 hours of submission. Outside of grantee convenings and trainings, Yolo County elections staff intentionally did not participate in grantee events to avoid duplication of efforts. This strategy freed county staff to concentrate on their own outreach strategies, including producing extensive digital media content.

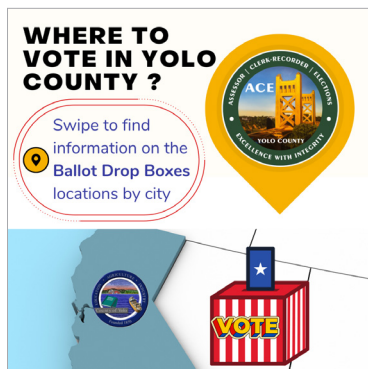


Image credit: Yolo Food Bank



Image credit: Thrive Alliance of Nonprofits

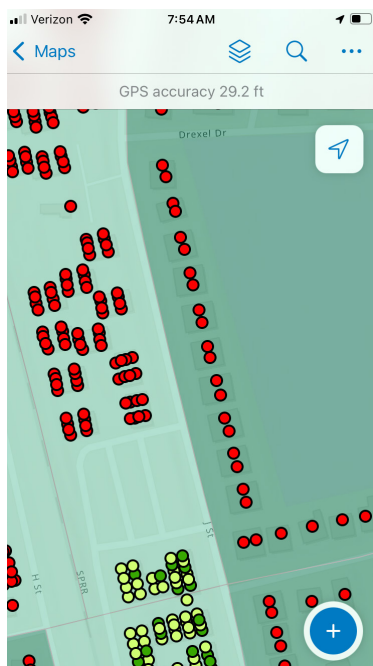


Image credit: Assessor/Clerk-Recorder/Elections Office, Yolo County

Screenshot from the field canvassing app

As depicted here, Yolo County grantees viewed areas with low turnout from November 2020 to assist in targeting their canvassing. The lighter the background color, the lower the turnout was in 2020. Canvassers used the mobile-based app to record if they left literature (light green dots) or spoke with a resident (dark green dots). The red dots indicated homes that still needed a visit.

Yolo County designed two apps to aid grantees and collect data

Inspired by grantee efforts during the primary election, Yolo County Chief Elections Officer Jesse Salinas encouraged county staff to build and launch two apps that grantees could use to report their progress during the general election cycle. Led by GIS Manager Mary Ellen Rosebrough, Yolo County staff employed ArcGIS mapping software to design mobile and web-based apps, built within the platform they had previously used to develop a suite of election management applications.

Mobile app users could easily identify residential addresses and voter turnout data from the 2020 general election, allowing grantees to tailor their campaigns to areas where turnout had historically been low. Grantees used the mobile app to track their door-to-door canvassing, including indicating whether they had spoken with a resident or left literature, the language with which they communicated, and the date and time of their outreach. This provided the foundation and the elections office with real-time data about which households were receiving visits. Canvassers could indicate whether there was a problem with an address and flag new residential addresses not listed on the map—all valuable information the county could use for future outreach activities. County staff evaluated data provided by canvassers and observed several helpful findings about their attempts to contact voters. For example, they learned that canvassers were least likely to reach residents on Mondays and were most successful talking with residents in person between 7 and 8 p.m.

Using the web-based app, grantees could report on their non-household specific outreach projects, such as community events and media campaigns. For example, a grantee could report that they hosted a community event attended by 400 people where they talked about voting and provided written information in both English and Russian languages. The grantee could also provide comments and upload photos of the event. Similarly, a grantee could report airing a radio commercial in Punjabi and estimate the likely number of listener impressions.

The dashboard for the two apps overlaid information from both sets of activities so a user could see, for example, if grantees had conducted an activity in or near a specific precinct. This real-time reporting informed the county, community foundation, and grantees which allowed for strategic adjustments before the election, provided consistency in the reporting of data that allowed for better analysis, and reduced the burden on grantees to have to recall and tally their activities at the end of the grant period.



Image credit: Assessor/Clerk-Recorder/Elections Office, Yolo County

Grantees received media kits with shared and custom outreach materials

While most grantee activities were conducted independently by individual organizations, some coordination among grantees occurred. Most notably, in each county, one nonprofit was designated to develop voter education materials that all other grantees could use for their outreach activities, customized with their own logos and design elements, if desired. In San Mateo County, Thrive Alliance—which had notable experience with county elections as co-chair of the VEOAC—developed a set of print and digital media resources in English, Spanish, Tongan, Chinese, and Tagalog including trifold brochures describing how to vote and a social media toolkit with graphics and recommended timing for posts. The Alliance created custom, branded materials for each interested grantee organization and several other local nonprofits. Additionally, the Alliance's shared folder included a large set of materials including official county documents, bookmarks, posters, and community activity templates that organizations could adapt, brand, and use as they saw fit. While many grantees posted and printed the materials on their own, Thrive Alliance also offered to print materials for the nonprofits, upon request.

Similarly, the Yolo Food Bank created a shared media kit in Spanish and English, including flyers, door hangers, social media posts, and A-frames. Several items in the media kit were official materials provided by the county elections office. The Food Bank designed other assets and worked with grantees to customize them with their own logos and style guides so the materials would feel more familiar to their constituencies. The Food Bank also coordinated bulk printing of items it had designed. Grantees could request the printed materials most useful to their planned activities using a separate printing budget provided by the Haas, Jr. Fund.

Grantees collaborated with other organizations

Besides sharing materials, some grantees coordinated their strategies and partnered with other organizations. In the foundation-sponsored introductory meetings, participating organizations shared their outreach plans and identified gaps and overlaps in their strategies as well as potential opportunities to collaborate. In San Mateo County, the Thrive Alliance hosted monthly voter engagement meetings for grantees and other local nonprofits and also encouraged grantee reporting at county-sponsored VEOAC meetings. In advance of each election, Thrive Alliance dedicated a voter engagement meeting to group planning where grantees and other community-based organization listed their planned activities on a wall poster and divided into regional tables to share their plans with local colleagues. Thrive Alliance also hosted a joint online calendar which a few organizations used to communicate with colleagues and the public about their voter education events, though usage was limited.

A few grantees reported partnering with other organizations after learning about their work. In particular, the League of Women Voters of South San Mateo County trained youth and other members of organizations newer to voter education, paired less experienced canvassers with seasoned League members, and managed multi-organization phone banks. The relationships were mutually beneficial with the League gaining insight into new populations and seeding relationships with trusted and established community leaders.

IMPACT ON VOTERS

Grantee work appears to have engaged voters and may have contributed to higher voter turnout

Several factors suggest that the grant-funded outreach programs in the two counties connected with voters and elevated voter turnout, particularly in targeted communities.

- Grantees conducted large volumes of voter contact—which is proven to drive turnout⁵—and their efforts concentrated on populations that are historically hard to reach.
- Voter turnout throughout Yolo County was not only above the statewide average, but also exceeded the county's rate of above-average turnout compared to recent election cycles.
- In selected neighborhoods grantees prioritized, some data suggest the turnout was higher than expected.
- Voters appeared to respond favorably to grantees' efforts, including expressing enthusiasm about outreach efforts and engaging with grantees' social media content.

When assessing voter turnout, it is critical to consider two caveats. First, it is difficult to draw a direct line between specific activities and voter participation. Far too many factors influence voter behavior and turnout rates, and this study was not designed to account for such externalities. Second, quantitative gains in voter turnout are not the best way to measure the success of an outreach program because other outcomes are equally important and easier to correlate directly with the outreach activities. San Mateo County's assistant chief elections officer, Irizarry, wisely cautions, "If your standard is voter turnout, everyone is capable of failing. Voter turnout is driven by voter interest in the election; candidates drive it. So, we have to look at another standard, did we touch base with the district we wanted to turn out?"

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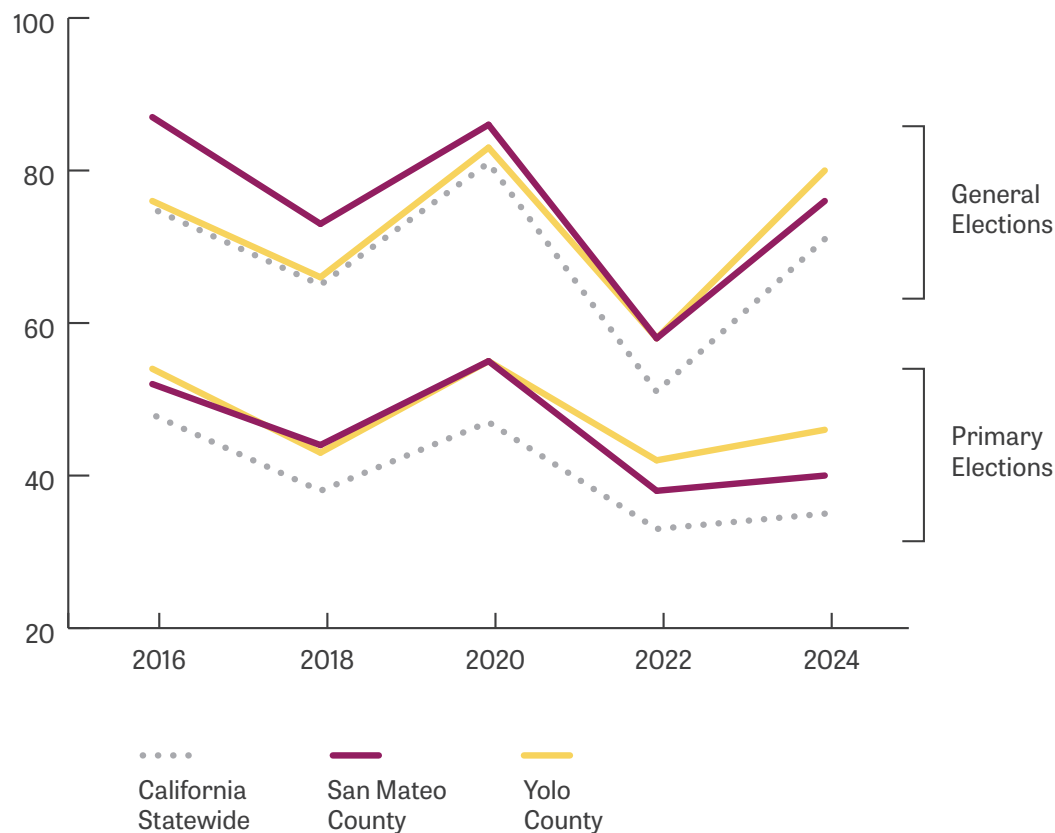
Jim Irizarry
Assistant Chief Elections Officer
San Mateo County

⁵ Garcia Bedolla, L. (2016, October 17). Direct Voter Contact Is Key to Boosting Turnout. *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/10/17/how-to-energize-demoralized-voters/direct-voter-contact-is-key-to-boosting-turnout>.

While voter turnout is just one metric, it is compelling to observe that 2024 turnout may have been higher than expected in the two counties. Matching statewide trends, overall voter turnout in both counties was lower than participation in the last Presidential election year, 2020. However, in Yolo County, the turnout rate beat statewide turnout by 11% in the primary and 9% in the general election, notably higher than the variance in recent election cycles.⁶

As seen in the graph below, turnout in San Mateo County is fairly consistently above the statewide average. **In Yolo County, the county's over-performance was considerably higher than usual in 2024, particularly in the general election cycle.** Notably, 2024 is the first year the county funded external partners to conduct voter outreach with the vast majority of funds being expended in the general election cycle.

Registered voter turnout in the 10 primary and general elections between 2016 and 2024



⁶ Voter Participation Statistics by County. California Secretary of State. Retrieved July 1, 2025, from <http://sos.ca.gov/elections/statistics/voter-participation-stats-county>.



Image credit: Youth Community Service

Voter turnout was higher than expected in some targeted communities

Though inconclusive, some data for hard-to-reach communities suggests that voter turnout was higher than expected among specific populations the grantees targeted. For example, in San Mateo County, Geoff Ryder, of the League of Women Voters, analyzed voter participation data and observed, **“a few percentage point increase in the neighborhoods we targeted in the primary.”** Additionally, in East Palo Alto, Ryder found that, **“The cohort of precincts we worked with showed a faster rate of returning ballots than other groupings.”**

An analysis by Yolo County elections staff identified several compelling findings:

- Despite a 3% countywide decline in turnout between the 2020 and 2024 general elections, **voter turnout at two targeted mobile home parks and three targeted apartment complexes saw turnout increases of 4% or more.**
- **Turnout of voters ages 18–21 also increased about 4%** between the 2020 and 2024 general elections.
- In 5 of the 16 census tracts grantees targeted in the general election, **voter turnout matched or exceeded statewide turnout**, an impressive feat for low-propensity neighborhoods.
- **In half of the 16 targeted Yolo County census tracts, voter turnout outperformed expectations**, either increasing since 2020 or declining at a smaller rate than the county as a whole from 2020 to 2024.
- In Winters, two of the three neighborhoods grantees targeted during the primary election **outperformed the city’s 39% turnout with more than 44% of registrants voting.**⁷

Altogether, Salinas described the turnout as “pretty impressive,” and noted, “we got a lot of bang for our buck.”

⁷ One of these precincts included a new housing development populated by moderate to high income earners who were not necessarily within the project’s targeted demographics.

Grantees reached a large number of voters

Exceeding expectations, funded organizations in San Mateo County reached more than 50,000 voters in person, 32,000 by phone, and more than 100,000 via online campaigns over the two election cycles. Election officials there called the fund “very valuable” to their voter outreach efforts. During Yolo County’s smaller launch of three initial grants in the primary, the Food Bank delivered repeated messages to 8,000 households, while other grantees connected with more than 3,000 voters via canvassing and tabling. In the general election, canvassers in Yolo County reported speaking with 311 residents and leaving literature with nearly 9,000 residents. Additionally, the Yolo Food Bank and Meals on Wheels delivered more than 13,000 messages with food distributions, and the YMCA contacted its 20,000 members and subscribers multiple times.

One San Mateo County staff member reflected on the grantees’ work, “These contacts were more individualized, face-to-face contacts that we don’t have the power to do.” Indeed, canvassing and other forms of direct voter contact require extensive personnel hours and may not merit results if the voter is not receptive. This is where mobilizing community leaders can be particularly efficacious. Voters who might feel disconnected from government are more likely to be receptive to trusted messengers, especially when they can speak to them in their primary language and at length about their personal values and concerns.

“Community organizations have deeper reach because of their existing, trusted relationships. Also, their outreach can be more cost-efficient because it is built on planned activities rather than requiring election officials to develop their own events and communication channels.”

Jessica Hubbard
Executive Director
Yolo Community Foundation

The public engaged with the content grantees created

The documents, radio spots, videos, and social media content grantees generated clearly resonated with voters. Nearly all interviewed grantees reported heavy interaction with their voting-related social media posts from likes, to messages thanking their organization, to voters asking for more information. Hui International, a Davis-based nonprofit rooted in the culture of the Hawaiian Islands, aimed to reach 10,000 people with the videos it created and posted online in English, Spanish, and Dari. Overall engagement ended up being much higher, with nearly 72,000 views. Notably, the Dari video was viewed far more times than the number of Dari speakers in Yolo County, perhaps suggesting it was sufficiently compelling to earn multiple views or that Dari speakers located elsewhere valued the in-language content, even if not specific to their locale.

Other grantees also experienced high voter demand for materials in less common languages. One organization reported extensive interest in translated materials, especially those in Tongan: “We were making hundreds of copies a week,” they said. When Davis Media Access posted a public service announcement video in Punjabi, engagement on the organization’s Instagram account rose 68%, drawing new populations and audiences to its work.

Voters provided positive feedback and expressed interest in voting

Grantees expressed clear belief that their communities learned about voting and were more likely to vote as a direct result of their grant-funded efforts. With friendly approaches from familiar voices in comfortable environments, organizers were able to reach many voters who don't typically give much thought to voting. Citizens whom they contacted often engaged in lengthy conversations, sought help such as identifying their polling place, and expressed gratitude for grantees' outreach efforts. Grantees consistently described the positive reactions to their outreach efforts, including likes on social media posts and "lots of energy at tabling activities." Two San Mateo County groups described their success educating large numbers of citizens about their right to register conditionally in the final days leading up to the election. They reported that voters were thrilled to learn they could still participate despite missing the 15-day registration deadline.

COMBINED \$406,600 IN GRANTS

in the 2024 primary and general election

19 ORGANIZATIONS

participated in the San Mateo County Voter Engagement Fund

9 NONPROFITS

utilized \$122,539 from the Yolo Voter Education Grants

MORE THAN 135,000 POTENTIAL VOTERS

were contacted through canvassing, community events, and mailings

AT LEAST 200,000

targeted media impressions with messages about how, when, and where to vote

OTHER INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

Inclusion and equity were central

A key priority of the county election officials funding the two grants programs was ensuring that citizens who face barriers to voting—such as language proficiency, financial instability, and historically low turnout in their community—would be motivated and prepared to cast a ballot. The grantees they supported were well positioned to access and have influence with hard-to-reach communities. Many of the participating nonprofits could leverage long-term existing relationships with their clients, neighbors, and friends. Most possessed strong cultural competency, along with an understanding of where targeted populations congregate, the languages they speak, and what types of messages might resonate with them. This was apparent in the creative social media posts grantees created, the well-populated community events they sponsored, and their ability to fill phone banks with multi-lingual callers.

While elections offices must speak to all populations within their jurisdictions, grantees were able to target specific populations they know well with culturally competent framing. They could also take risks, developing niche, funny, and sometimes irreverent content meant to appeal to specific groups of voters. Grantees consistently reported positive public reactions to the content they created, including everything from viral dances to puppet interviews, saying they believe it reflects and connects well with their communities. Additionally, community members who might be unlikely to attend a government-sponsored information session on voting practices, clearly enjoyed fun, often family-friendly community events where they got to learn about voting through games and engaging conversations. Election officials expressed enthusiasm about grantees' inventive, popular content and well-attended events. They reported gleaned new ideas they can incorporate into their own outreach efforts and expressed interest in reposting grantee materials in future election cycles.

"The grants allowed us to extend the county's reach to more voters. We tried to coordinate with grantees and not overlap or duplicate their work. This freed up our staff to do a lot of innovative work."

Jesse Salinas
Chief Elections Officer
Yolo County

The grants programs promoted greater efficiency

In both counties, election officials experienced a notable boost in countywide voter education activity with little impact on their staffing; in fact, just the opposite. In San Mateo, county elections staff say they received far more in return than they spent in staff time to administer the program. One county outreach coordinator said, "I spent a few hours weekly [on the program]; It really doesn't take much, and the amount they [grantees] were able to accomplish was a lot more than our office could do solo." Officials also appreciated that they only had to make one grant, with the foundations and grantees taking care of the rest. Salinas said his office was careful not to duplicate or overlap with the efforts of grantee partners. Ultimately, he said the grants program reduced the time his staff might otherwise spend on attending events, allowing them to focus on creating social media and other voter information materials.

Grantees also experienced efficiency, particularly with regard to shared materials. Many expressed appreciation they did not have to develop their own materials or pay for translations. One said, "Having it all designed and bilingual was numero uno." Others liked the diversity of materials that were available, including door hangers and over-sized posters. Several noted the enhanced credibility and reach

“It’s a net positive because you have more organizations and people doing the work. When people are working together toward similar goals, it makes your effort that much more effective. There’s synergy, and a multiplier effect.”

Jim Irizarry
Assistant Chief Elections Officer
San Mateo County

of materials featuring multiple organizations’ logos, extending the reputation of their own organizations. A Yolo County grantee felt she could trust the quality of the voter outreach materials made for her organization. She said, “We knew they were solid because they had been reviewed by county staff.”

Grantees in both counties raved about the ease of the proposal and reporting processes, contrasting them with traditional, often onerous processes imposed on nonprofits by foundations and government. One grantee said that the foundation “made it the easiest possible thing to apply for. They are friendly and available; they support you every step of the way.” Another grantee said, “It was a very gentle, simple process,” and especially appreciated the chance to learn from other grantees during the group oral reporting sessions the foundation offered. Similarly, elections offices appreciated the smooth administrative processes led by the community foundations, expressing that their offices were required to do very little, yet benefitted the most.

The funds advanced election integrity

Through the grants programs, election officials were optimally positioned to reinforce election laws, ensure election integrity, and set a standard of nonpartisan outreach. County staff had multiple opportunities to reinforce norms and expectations such as through grant agreements and meetings organized for the grantee cohorts where staff trained community organizers directly. Grantees were receptive to learning from the counties—the funders of their projects—and many reported appreciating receiving clear guidelines that they could incorporate into their plans and use to educate their volunteers.

Grantees and elections offices collaborated effectively

As a direct result of the funding program, several grantees established new, mutually beneficial relationships with elections office staff. Some nonprofits sought help from the counties, including voting information and assistance targeting voters. Many appreciated having ready access to useful materials, such as maps of precincts with low voter participation provided by both counties. A few nonprofit grantees conducted direct partnership activities like tabling with county staff, which grantees said provided a more enriching experience for potential voters. Many grantees reported feeling more confident and prepared to reach out to their elections office in the future. A few grantees also embraced the chance to assist the elections offices on issues like translation support. One said, “We are very keen on ... working with the county. Our mission is well aligned. They also work with vulnerable populations.” Likewise, county staff were inspired to partner more closely with community-based organizations. Salinas said, “It was very helpful to our staff to realize we can work with nonprofits in this capacity; it opened the door to collaborating on an ongoing, continuous basis.”

Though limited, grantee coordination was helpful

Grantees welcomed opportunities to coordinate with other participating nonprofits, even if collaboration was limited. Participating nonprofits had a few opportunities to learn about each other’s work, including the kick-off meetings each foundation hosted and a group planning session led by Thrive Alliance in San Mateo. At least three organizations in San Mateo County and one in Yolo County reported changing their strategies after learning about the work of others. However, several grantees reported that they were not aware of how other funded organizations were utilizing their grants, either because they did not attend the grantee meetings or did not have enough repeated exposure to others’ work.

One organization reported a direct benefit of being part of the grantee cohort. When the organization sought permission to canvass at a 1,000-unit apartment complex, the owner granted access both to the complex’s residents and its community room because several of the organizations participating in the funding program were familiar, trusted community partners.

Staff and volunteers deepened their commitment to civic engagement

Several grantees reported that their staff and volunteers were more knowledgeable about and interested in voting after participating in the grants program. Some staff expressed deeper commitment to civic engagement and said that conducting voter education provided them with a sense of community and achievement. One outreach volunteer said, “It was a joyful experience, being able to laugh with them and remind them to vote.”⁸ This was particularly true among those assisting people in their own language or cultural community. One volunteer with PBRC said, “Through phone banking ... I was able to provide civic engagement to a community which has mistakenly been considered ‘apolitical.’ Conducting voter outreach to the Filipino community of Daly City not only proved this stereotype false, but also highlighted the multiple barriers that often prevent members of our community from engaging in their civic duty.”⁹

Young volunteers were effective ambassadors and deepened their own commitment to voting

Many grantees recruited young people to conduct voter outreach, a strategy that simultaneously served to advance democratic principles and reinforce the importance of voting among future voters. Multiple grantees reflected on the benefits of employing youth canvassers, noting that voters were more intrigued because young people were involved as spokespeople. Several organizations paired younger volunteers with seasoned canvassers, providing opportunities for mentorship. One organization hired computer science majors as interns, equipping them with skills that can be applied in future election cycles, as well as census and redistricting processes. Some grantees empowered youth to create their organizations’ social media content, ensuring it would be fresh, savvy, and appealing to other young people.

One organization witnessed apathy among young participants near the start of the grant period morph into enthusiasm for voting by Election Day. Additionally, participating youth reported feeling more informed about ballot propositions.



Image credit: Youth Community Service

The funding programs strengthened local nonprofit ecosystems

It is likely the grants programs will have an ongoing influence on participating organizations, many of which were new to voter education. Several organizations noted that their grant represented their first foray into voter education and without the grants program they likely would not have participated in the election. All such organizations indicated interest in participating in future election cycles. This suggests that the simple existence of a funding program might inspire and expand voter outreach activities within a county.

Numerous grantees expressed gratitude that the grant program helped strengthen their organizations allowing them to pay for staff, launch new programs, and develop new community partnerships. One grantee new to voter education efforts reflected: “It was really exciting for us to do this and offer this to the people we work with.” Participating organizations appreciated being able to hire members of their community, with some providing bonuses for high productivity. “We like to be able to give back to the community,” said one. Other organizations experienced increased visibility in the community and stronger partnerships with other nonprofits. One reported attracting an entirely new language population to its client base after using grant funds to post in-language content that received extensive interaction.

⁸ Pilipino Bayanihan Resource Center. (2024). *Field Report: March 2024 Primary Election*. <https://siliconvalleycf.box.com/shared/static/kzrqvifafpij3smpaqsd6gef1umdrm5.pdf>.

⁹ Ibid.



Image credit: Youth Community Service

Publicly-funded grant programs leveraged philanthropic investments

Offering regional grant funds appears to have attracted local philanthropic funders, including those who had not previously supported such efforts. For example, the grants program was a first for Yolo Community Foundation, which had not previously funded voter education. Silicon Valley Community Foundation expanded the coffers of the San Mateo County grants program while the Haas, Jr. Fund provided additional funding in both counties. Two grantees reported leveraging the grants they received from their county to earn sizable matching donations from other local benefactors. This may suggest that the availability of public funds for voter outreach could inspire private funders and expand the pool of philanthropic dollars available for voter education and engagement, representing a multiplier effect on a county's investment.

“Being able to make a grant that would inspire the county to match was a very compelling opportunity.”

Raúl Macías
Program Director, Democracy
Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund

CHALLENGES

While participants in the two funds largely reported positive experiences, they also identified a few areas for improvement in future cycles.

Grantees needed more time for planning, materials development, and hiring

The most commonly cited challenge grantees faced was too little time to plan for and execute their grants. Many struggled to secure sufficient staff, volunteers, and translators due to short grant terms. Some grantees wished they had more time to align their strategies with potential partners. Others were not able to secure translation services from community members within the timeframe of the grant and had to pay a for-profit translation firm instead. One grantee needing translations said, “The short timeline was brutal. Folks were already booked.”

Some could not complete planned projects because they needed additional time to coordinate with institutions. For example, one funded organization was not granted access to voters serving time in county jails within the grant time frame. Another could not get permission to conduct outreach at the local community college within the timespan of the grant. In Yolo County, many grantees did not receive their approved and printed materials until three weeks before the election, which limited distribution opportunities and required them to cancel some planned activities. One grantee said, “We had to start canvassing before we had any printed materials. It felt like we were behind the eight ball.”

Some organizations were notified of grant approval three months before Election Day while others received approvals and grants six to eight weeks before the election. With ballots arriving in voters’ mailboxes four weeks before each election, grantees would have preferred starting voter education two to four weeks prior to ballots dropping. Additionally, most reported that they needed several additional weeks to plan their activities, coordinate with other organizations, develop materials, hire staff, and recruit volunteers. Many said they would have liked access to their funds at least three months before Election Day, while others said “as early as possible.” The two organizations that developed materials on behalf of other grantees recommended providing at least one additional month of lead time to prepare materials, though two months would be even better in order to accommodate translations and coordination with the elections office and community foundation.

TIMELINE

Recommended timeline for administering a community grants program

Months correspond to a March primary cycle for a Presidential election year;
adjust timeline forward three months for a June primary



Accessing materials caused some delays and confusion

In Yolo County, the community foundation and the Yolo Food Bank tested novel strategies that were largely successful but also contributed to delays in delivery of voter information materials. As a result, some grantees had to alter or pare back planned activities. First, the foundation thoughtfully designated print credits to each grantee organization, a welcome source of additional funds. While appreciated by grantees, utilizing the print credit also introduced confusion that contributed to delays.

The Yolo County program funded the Food Bank—with its sophisticated communications shop and experience communicating with vulnerable populations—to produce a variety of voter education materials that could be customized and printed for each grantee organization. Though the materials were well-received, the process and timeframe for distributing them did not align with the activity timelines of several grantees. Many of the funded organizations had hoped to have materials in hand in late September for planned in-person events and to start educating voters prior to ballots arriving in their mailboxes. However, the materials were not completed until October 11, three and a half weeks before the election. The Food Bank encountered multiple challenges creating the materials, including the complexity of coordinating approvals and bulk print orders with the county, foundation, vendors, and grantees. Additionally, the community foundation and the Food Bank, both new to elections outreach, misinterpreted when the addresses of voting locations would be available. Hubbard reflected, “We didn’t understand enough about the process at that time to ask the right questions.”

The materials that Thrive Alliance created for San Mateo County grantees were available considerably sooner, five weeks earlier than planned. Two key factors contributed to this difference in timing. First, Thrive Alliance primarily shared digital files which grantees printed or posted on their own. As a result, grantees did not need to wait for the Alliance to gather their orders, coordinate bulk printings, or distribute printed materials. However, besides small batches of printing Thrive Alliance conducted for grantees in need, using digital files required most grantees to coordinate their own printing, presumably at a higher cost. Second, instead of waiting for a list of official voting locations from the county, Thrive Alliance included in its materials a QR code that would lead users to web-based information that could be updated as needed. Yolo Food Bank also considered utilizing QR codes but ultimately determined this approach would not be as accessible as written lists of voting locations, especially for seniors, people with disabilities, and voters with limited internet access.

A lack of clarity around materials approval caused some confusion and delays

Expectations around approval of voter outreach materials were not entirely clear, leading to confusion among grantees and even among county elections and foundation staff. Given the high volume of digital media and other materials many grantees created and the quick turnaround time required, it was not feasible for county elections staff to approve every item funded by the grants. Indeed, election officials had no intention of doing so. Salinas said, “My office should not be getting involved with the tone and style of how you are communicating the message. Instead, our role is to make sure the specifics about the locations and how to vote is accurate.” Similarly, San Mateo County elections staff reported they did not require approval of grantee materials.

However, nuanced requests by county elections staff introduced confusion about approval requirements. Staff in both counties requested that when grantees used official documents or facts provided by the county they not alter or edit any information without seeking approval. In one meeting, an official advised grantees that when using copy provided by the county, they could remove information but should not change any details. In another meeting, an election official stated that grantees “can’t use anything that says it’s from the elections office unless they have our approval.” While these requests are reasonable, they raised some doubts among grantees, especially those that were new to elections, about which materials were acceptable or needed approval.

Ultimately, Yolo Community Foundation believed that the county required approval of all written materials and communicated that expectation to its grantees. At least two Yolo County grantees reported seeking approval from the county for all media their organizations created. One said she believed she was required to have the English versions of all materials approved by the county, but could then translate the content into other languages without seeking additional approvals.

Grantees would have benefited from more collaboration

Though most grantees were aware of each other’s work, strategic coordination of their efforts was fairly limited. The community foundations seeded the potential for collaboration with joint introductory meetings at the beginning of each grant period. In San Mateo County, Thrive Alliance facilitated a meeting at which grantees wrote their planned activities on shared posters and shared strategies in small groups; the organization also hosted a shared online calendar and newsletter so grantees could continue sharing information throughout the grant periods. Several grantees reported that these activities were informative, and that they changed their plans after learning about the work of colleagues.

However, many other grantees did not feel adequately informed about the tactics and target populations of their funded peers. Some were not able to attend the full cohort meetings or sent staff who did not report back. As a result, there was some duplication of effort with grantees covering the same turf. Additionally, at least one grantee saw a key component of their project unravel when they learned that another grantee had already targeted the same population and started negotiating with a sensitive partner, a relationship the original grantee had nurtured long-term. Several said they would have preferred a more formal mapping exercise or list of grantee activities to understand how their work overlapped with or complemented that of others.

It was not always clear how to interact with elections staff

While grantees generally reported that county and foundation staff were accessible and responsive, some experienced barriers to communicating with the San Mateo County elections office following the untimely death of their long-time contact in the office in early 2024. Quite understandably, some confusion about whom to contact and longer-than-desired response times marked the transition period as new staff assumed the responsibilities of their late colleague. While the issue was largely resolved by the general election cycle, grantees did recommend that, in the future, counties should provide a clear protocol for engaging with county staff, including whom to contact and expected response times.

Grantees confronted other minor hurdles

Grantees identified a number of minor obstacles they faced that, if addressed, could improve the grantee experience and efficiency in future funding cycles.

- In the primary cycle, nearly all San Mateo County grantees struggled to meet the biweekly reporting requirement requested by the county, noting that it required hours of staff time each week to track down and format data from multiple staff and volunteers. Based on this feedback, SVCF adjusted its approach for the general election, requiring only one mid-term and one final report.
- Most San Mateo County grantees did not have access to the voter file. The elections office identified precincts with low voter turnout, but not having the addresses of registered voters in the priority precincts meant the grantees were limited in their capacity to target voters and record their interactions. Several grantees requested more expansive access to voter information in future cycles.
- In Yolo County, where grantees were prohibited from conducting voter registration drives, some grantees were unsure what information they could provide about voter registration or how to handle requests from citizens who asked to register to vote.
- Some grantees using the apps designed by the Yolo County elections office were concerned they could unintentionally jeopardize the immigration status of non-citizens they educated at public events by entering their addresses in the county's app. Election administrators clarified that they only expected grantees to input addresses they visited while canvassing and that no names or demographics of individual voters would be submitted.
- Several grantees reported difficulty recruiting volunteers, in part due to short grant periods. One organization found it difficult to find young people who were willing to canvass. Another grantee said that some experienced community activists with language skills and cultural competency were undocumented and concerned about the perceived risk of being involved in voting.

Finally, many participants, including election administrators, raised concerns about sustained, long-term funding for voter education and engagement activities. One said, "The biggest challenge is where does the money come from?" Many argued that funding should cover longer grant periods, should be more predictable, and ideally be continuous. Several recommended that the State of California should partner with counties and community foundations to fund local voter education grant programs statewide.

CONCLUSION

The 2024 voter education funds in San Mateo and Yolo counties offer a compelling model for expanding civic participation through strategic, community-rooted partnerships. By leveraging county funds and philanthropic support, election officials successfully extended their outreach capacity while empowering trusted messengers from community-based organizations to educate and mobilize hard-to-reach voters.

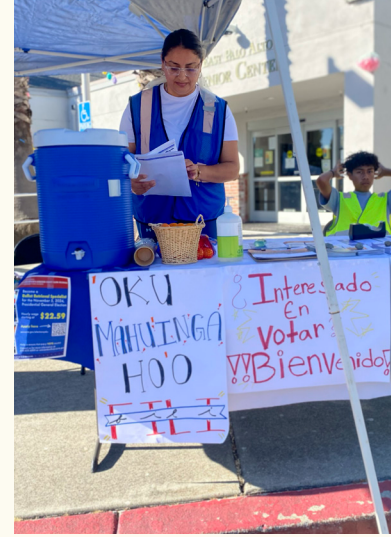


Image credit: Youth Community Service

The data and anecdotes collected from these programs reveal that thoughtful investment in local organizations, coupled with clear guidance, timely funding, and shared resources, can generate substantial impact. From robust voter contact and high engagement with in-language materials, to improved turnout in targeted communities, the funding programs demonstrate how public dollars can be multiplied and made more effective through nonprofit collaboration.

Moreover, the initiatives seeded relationships among election officials and nonprofits, empowered young and multilingual volunteers, and introduced scalable innovations such as shared media kits and voter outreach apps. They also exposed areas for refinement, including the need for earlier grant approval, clearer coordination, and sustained funding to support long-term planning and institutional growth.

As California continues to advance its vision of equitable democratic participation, the San Mateo and Yolo County experiences underscore the vital role of community organizations in reaching voters who too often go unheard. These programs not only met immediate voter education needs but also laid a foundation for more inclusive, efficient, and responsive election outreach in future cycles, locally and potentially statewide.

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