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CA-25 Special Election Analysis

On May 12th of this year, California's 25th Congressional District held a special election to replace resigned Democratic representative Katie Hill. The district had been Republican held for twenty-six years prior to Hill soundly defeating the Republican incumbent in 2018 by nearly 10%. With Hill resigning amid scandal in late 2019, Democrats nominated Assemblywoman Christy Smith to face Republican political newcomer Mike Garcia, a Latino and formal Naval officer.

Garcia handily defeated Smith 54.9% to 45.1%, sending shockwaves throughout Democratic circles that never imagined such an emphatic loss of a California house seat to be possible. With the election taking place in the midst of the COVID-19 epidemic, many saw the race as a test-run to pilot a renewed emphasis on vote-by-mail strategies favored by progressives and mocked by prominent conservatives. All registered voters were directly mailed a ballot to their homes, with in-person polling locations limited compared to past years. **However, whether it was in-person or by mail, the election adhered to the laws of many special elections: the electorate was older and whiter, spelling doom for the Democratic candidate.**

CA-25: The Deep Democracy Data Tells a Story

In 2018, California's 25th Congressional District was seen as a prime example of Democrat's growing strength due to Donald Trump's unfavourability with more affluent white voters. Hillary Clinton had comfortably carried the district in 2016 despite it reelecting a Republican incumbent. With that in mind, Democrats successfully targeted it in 2018, winning back the seat for the first time since 1990. But the underlying data demographic factors developed in our Deep Democracy 2.0 research tells us a low turnout election was always a danger for Democrats.

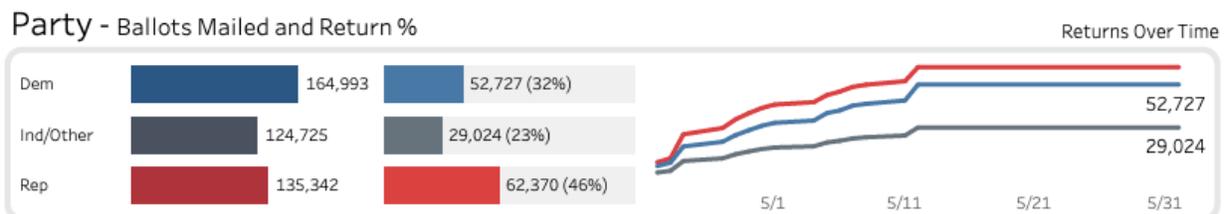
Those demographic factors—nonwhite population compared to statewide average and college educated population compared to statewide average—illustrate why this seat was always a perilous hold for Democrats.

The district is whiter than the rest of the state, about 40% compared to the statewide average of 37%. The college education disparity is starker: only 28.6% of the district is college educated, substantially less than the statewide average of 34.2%. These realities make CA-25 especially vulnerable to poor Democratic performance when young people and people of color display poor voter turnout. On May 12th, these factors coincided for a lopsided Republican victory.

Vote-by-Mail Alone won't Save Democrats

With the COVID-19 pandemic making in-person voting dangerous, vote-by-mail has become a trendy emphasis for progressives and the Democratic party. But the special election in CA-25 shows the perilous gamble here for Democrats. **Namely, vote-by-mail is a long-standing tradition for older, white Americans who favor the Republican party.** In a low-turnout special election in which every voter received a ballot in their mailbox, Democrats struggled to properly organize and mobilize their base in this new reality. On that, the data is clear.

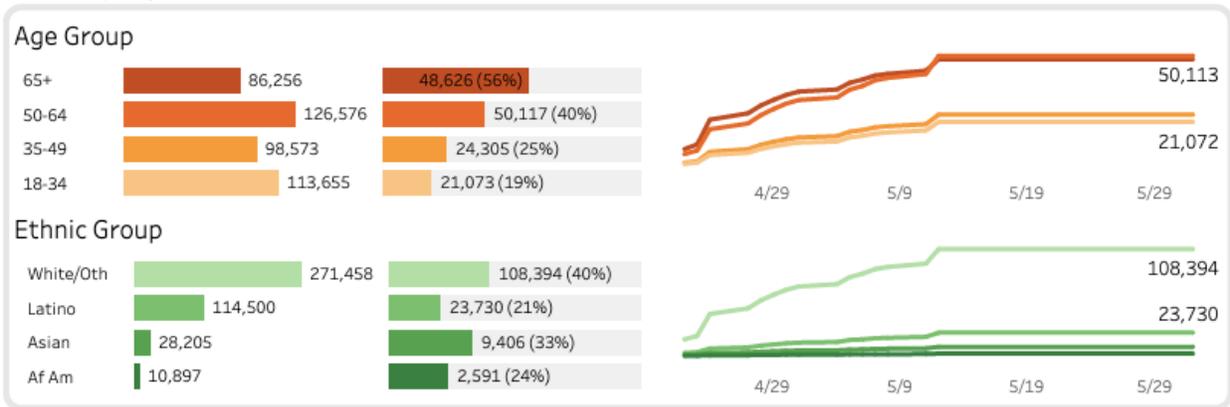
According to Political Data Inc., which tracked mailed and returned ballots in the CA-25 election, Republicans and their traditional demographics dominated. As the graph below shows, 46% of Republicans returned their mail-in ballot, compared to only 32% of Democrats.



Source: [Political Data Inc.](#)

The demographic breakdowns tell an even clearer story. Over 46% of voters over the age of 50 returned a ballot in the mail, with that % jumping to 56% for those over the age of 65. Only 22% of voters under the age of 50 returned a ballot in the mail, with that number dropping to 19% for voters exclusively under the age of 35. And in a district that is 40% white and 40% Hispanic, the data is equally clear. Eligible white voters returned a mail-in ballot at a rate of 40%; Hispanic voters barely eclipsed 21%.

Demographics - Ballots Mailed and Return %



Source: [Political Data Inc.](https://www.politicaldata.com)

The lesson of the mail-in ballot data should be obvious to Democrats and their supporters: it is not enough to provide easy access to the ballot box in this moment. You must provide a reason for your potential voters to support your campaign, regardless of the method they ultimately choose. In the midst of a public health crisis disproportionately affecting the Latino community, Democrats cannot take its participation for granted in the upcoming 2020 election cycle.

Smith, a centrist candidate with little ties to the Latino community, was unable to mobilize the Democratic voting bloc to her advantage. Conversely, Garcia, with no previous record to attack or tie him to unpopular Republican initiatives, rode an engaged electorate of older, white voters accustomed to voting-by-mail.

The question moving forward for Democrats: in a cycle in which the national party has favored a strategy of appealing to older, white voters, can campaigns properly mobilize the traditional but less-likely-to-vote liberal voting blocs of young people and people of color in the midst of voter suppression tactics and fears of in-person electioneering?