

Toward 2050 in California

A Roundtable Report on Economic Inclusion
and Political Participation in the San Joaquin Valley

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Introduction and summary

As the country prepares for a substantial demographic shift by the year 2042 that will result in no clear racial or ethnic majority in our population, Progress 2050—a project of the Center for American Progress—and PolicyLink—a national research and action institute advancing economic and social equity—have partnered to host a series of roundtables in communities that have already experienced aspects of this population shift. The roundtables are meant to help us learn from these communities about what the rest of the country may have in store. This is the third report in a series documenting these roundtable discussions, cataloging a conversation that took place in the San Joaquin Valley in central California in October 2011. The first roundtable was hosted in Arlington, Virginia, and the second roundtable was hosted in Los Angeles, California.

The San Joaquin Valley roundtable was hosted in conjunction with California Rural Legal Assistance, the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program, and the Center for Regional Change at the University of California, Davis, and with support from Climate Plan. Progress 2050 and PolicyLink formed this partnership to initiate a national conversation to explore a new vision of what America can and should be by the year 2050. The longer-term objective of this effort is to learn from local leaders what investments are needed to ensure that our nation embraces its diverse future. We intend for these conversations to inform our policy agendas and ultimately help craft policy that lifts up communities of color and creates a future in which we all can prosper.

The San Joaquin Valley was chosen as a site for this discussion due to the rapid growth it is experiencing, which is outpacing the rest of the state. While most of this growth results from a natural increase in population, as opposed to foreign or domestic migration, the San Joaquin Valley has also been a popular destination for many agricultural migrants. As of 2010 Latinos comprised 48.6 percent of the San Joaquin Valley's population, compared to 37.6 percent of California's population and 16.3 percent of the U.S. population.

This demographic shift has taken place against a backdrop of socioeconomic struggles. The region has some of the nation's highest unemployment and poverty rates, while it is also home to some of the country's lowest educational attainment levels and greatest health disparities between white and nonwhite populations. Additionally, the area suffers from extremely high levels of incarceration that have resulted in the imprisonment of people of color at significantly higher levels than white residents, which consequently has disenfranchised a large percentage of nonwhite residents.

While these struggles may seem insurmountable, there are promising initiatives emerging in the San Joaquin Valley that seek to improve the level of civic engagement within communities of color and, as a consequence, increase their political representation in ways that close these disparities.

The roundtable itself was convened in Fresno County because the county is a major population center, and Fresno is the largest city in the valley. Participants included community advocates, policy researchers, business leaders, academics, foundation representatives, and the staff of local elected officials. Accordingly, much of the conversation and supplementary information documented in this report refers to Fresno-specific statistics, yet it should be noted that much of the analysis applies the broader San Joaquin Valley as well.

We begin this account by providing some demographic context about the San Joaquin Valley. We then proceed to address the four key issues that roundtable participants raised as disproportionately impacting communities of color in central California—employment, education, health, and incarceration.

Lastly, we focus on the conviction expressed by several of our roundtable participants that improving the levels of political representation and civic engagement in communities of color might effectively reduce racial and ethnic disparities in the aforementioned challenges that the region faces.

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