



Institute of Governmental Studies
126 Moses Hall
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720
Tel: 510-642-6835
Email: igs@berkeley.edu

Release #2020-28

Friday, November 20, 2020

Taxes, Proposition 13 and this year's vote on the split roll property tax initiative, Proposition 15.

Voters' continuing support of Prop. 13, the 1978 property tax reduction initiative, and their belief that taxes were already at high levels appeared to work against Prop. 15's passage.

by Mark DiCamillo
Director, Berkeley IGS Poll
(c) 415-602-5594

In its the final pre-election survey completed in late October the *Berkeley IGS Poll* asked voters their views about the landmark 1978 property tax reduction initiative, Proposition 13, as well as about the current levels of state and local taxes that the average Californian has to pay.

The findings indicate that California voters continue to broadly support Proposition 13 and would endorse its passage by a wide margin if it were up for a vote again today. While there has been a steady increase in the proportion of voters with no opinion of the iconic initiative over the years, among voters voicing an opinion, supporters outnumber opponents by a nearly three to one margin (53% to 19%).

There was also a clear relationship between how voters viewed Proposition 13 and how they were intending to vote on this year's "split roll" property tax initiative, Proposition 15. By greater than an eight-to-one margin (76% to 9%) No voters on Proposition 15 were nearly universally supportive of Proposition 13 if it were up for a vote again today. By contrast, Yes voters on this year's split roll property tax initiative were more evenly divided about how they would vote on the original Proposition 13.

In addition, the poll found that an historically large proportion of voters (81%) now feels the level of state and local taxes paid by the average Californian is high, while just 19% consider taxes in the state to be low or about right. In previous statewide surveys dating back to 1977, the only other times that greater than three in four voters described the level of state and local taxes as being high were in 1982 and 1991, both years in which the state was experiencing an economic downturn.

By a nearly five-to-one margin (78% to 16%) voters also agreed that taxes in California were already so high that they were driving many people and businesses out of the state. No voters

on Proposition 15 were again nearly universally in agreement with this statement and even voters supporting Proposition 15 agreed more than two to one.

When asked to consider the level of taxes that the average Californian paid in five specific areas, greater than two in three voters described the following state taxes as high -- state gasoline taxes (71%), state income taxes (71%), sales taxes (69%) and property taxes (68%).

IGS Co-Director Eric Schickler commented that “while California voters generally endorse greater government involvement in many public policy areas, concerns about tax levels continue to be a major obstacle to generating the funds necessary to pay for these programs.”

Familiarity with Prop. 13 has declined over the years

When asked how familiar they were with the landmark property tax reduction Proposition 13 approved by voters in the 1978 statewide election, one in four voters (25%) reports being very familiar with it. Another 31% are somewhat familiar with the initiative, while 44% report being not too or not at all familiar. The current findings represent a 12 percentage-point decline in the proportion of voters very familiar with Proposition 13 compared to 2008, the last time this question was asked to a statewide sample of voters.

Familiarity with the iconic initiative is directly related to a voter’s age, with just 5% of voters under age 30 saying they are very familiar with Proposition 13, compared to 56% of voters age 75 or older reporting this.

| | Very familiar % | Somewhat familiar % | Not too/not at all familiar % |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| Total -- October 2020 | 25 | 31 | 44 |
| May 2008* | 37 | 30 | 33 |
| <i>Age</i> | | | |
| 18-29 | 5 | 21 | 74 |
| 30-39 | 11 | 25 | 64 |
| 40-49 | 18 | 35 | 47 |
| 50-64 | 34 | 35 | 30 |
| 65-74 | 41 | 38 | 21 |
| 75 or older | 56 | 29 | 15 |

* 2008 poll results are from a statewide survey of California registered voters conducted by The Field Poll as reported in a press release published on June 6, 2008 by Field Research Corporation.

Voters would continue to endorse Prop. 13 if it were up for a vote again today

California voters approved Proposition 13 by a nearly two to one margin (65% to 35%) in the June 1978 statewide election. Statewide polls conducted in the years following its passage have repeatedly shown that the initiative has remained very popular with the electorate, and results from the current *Berkeley IGS Poll* provide further confirmation of this.

When voters in the latest survey were asked how they would vote if Proposition 13 were up for a vote again today 53% say would favor it while just 19% would vote against it. Another 28% had no opinion.

Thus, even though there has been a steady increase in the proportion of voters with no opinion of the initiative over the years, among voters voicing an opinion, supporters outnumber opponents nearly three to one.

Table 2
Voter preferences regarding the 1978 Proposition 13 property tax reduction initiative if it were up for a vote again – now vs. 2008 and 1998
(among registered voters)

| | Favor | Against | No opinion |
|-------------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| | % | % | % |
| 2020 | 53 | 19 | 28 |
| 2008* | 57 | 23 | 20 |
| 1998* | 53 | 30 | 17 |
| 1978** | 65 | 35 | -- |

* 1998 and 2008 poll results are from statewide surveys of registered voters conducted by The Field Poll as reported on June 6, 2008 and May 18, 1998 by Field Research Corporation.

** Official election results of Proposition 13 in June 1978 statewide primary election as reported by the California Secretary of State.

Support for Proposition 13 remains broad-based

The survey finds that voter support for the Proposition 13 property tax cut initiative continues to be very broad-based across major subgroups of the registered voter population.

Expressing the highest levels of support for Proposition 13 are Republicans, conservatives, long-time homeowners and seniors, greater than seven in ten of whom would endorse the initiative if it were up for a vote again today. Voters who reported being very or somewhat familiar with the initiative say they would back Proposition 13 68% to 26%. In addition, majorities or pluralities of registered Democrats, No Party Preference voters, political moderates, renters, and voters across all age, race, gender and regions of the state would also back the initiative if voting on it today.

The only major voter subgroup of voters where more would vote against Proposition 13 than would support it are Californians describing themselves as very liberal in politics.

Table 3
Current voter preferences of Proposition 13, the 1978 property tax reduction initiative, if it were up for a vote again today (among registered voters)

| | Favor % | Against % | No opinion % |
|--|------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Total statewide | 53 | 19 | 28 |
| Very/somewhat familiar | 68 | 26 | 6 |
| Not too/not at all familiar | 33 | 10 | 57 |
| Democrat | 39 | 26 | 35 |
| Republican | 76 | 8 | 16 |
| No Party Preference/other | 55 | 17 | 28 |
| Very conservative | 73 | 11 | 16 |
| Somewhat conservative | 76 | 8 | 16 |
| Moderate | 57 | 12 | 31 |
| Somewhat liberal | 42 | 27 | 31 |
| Very liberal | 26 | 39 | 35 |
| Renter | 41 | 20 | 39 |
| Homeowner | 65 | 18 | 17 |
| <i>Ownership of current home . . .</i> | | | |
| Less than 5 years | 57 | 19 | 24 |
| 5-20 years | 67 | 18 | 15 |
| 21-40 years | 70 | 20 | 10 |
| More than 40 years | 88 | 5 | 7 |
| Los Angeles County | 47 | 19 | 34 |
| South Coast | 56 | 14 | 30 |
| Inland Empire | 61 | 13 | 26 |
| Other Southern California | 54 | 19 | 27 |
| Central Valley | 59 | 14 | 27 |
| San Francisco Bay Area | 46 | 30 | 24 |
| Other Northern California | 60 | 19 | 21 |
| Male | 55 | 21 | 24 |
| Female | 51 | 16 | 33 |
| 18-29 | 37 | 16 | 47 |
| 30-39 | 40 | 21 | 39 |
| 40-49 | 50 | 19 | 31 |
| 50-64 | 60 | 19 | 21 |
| 65-74 | 67 | 19 | 15 |
| 75 or older | 71 | 17 | 12 |
| White | 59 | 21 | 20 |
| Latino | 40 | 17 | 43 |
| Asian / Pacific Islander | 52 | 18 | 30 |
| Black | 52 | 14 | 34 |

Relationship between views of Proposition 13 and likely voter preferences on this year’s split roll property tax initiative, Proposition 15

The poll finds a clear relationship between voter views of Proposition 13 and their voting preferences on this year’s “split roll” tax initiative, Proposition 15, that sought to alter the way commercial and industrial properties were being taxed under Proposition 13.

Voters intending to vote No on the split roll initiative would overwhelmingly endorse Proposition 13 if voting on the initiative again today (76% to 9%), while Yes voters were more divided.

Table 4

Voter views of the 1978 Proposition 13 property tax reduction initiative and its relationship to voting preferences on this year’s “split roll” property tax initiative, Proposition 15 (among likely voters)

| <u>Opinion of Proposition 13</u> | Total likely voters % | Voting Yes on Prop. 15 % | Voting No on Prop. 15 % | Undecided on Prop. 15 % |
|---|------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Favor | 54 | 37 | 76 | 40 |
| Against | 20 | 30 | 9 | 10 |
| No opinion | 26 | 33 | 15 | 50 |

Voter views of competing statements about taxes and Propositions 13 and 15

The poll posed four statements relating to taxes in California and about Propositions 13 and 15 and asked voters whether they agreed or disagreed with each statement. The results indicate that voter views about each statement were also correlated to voting preferences on this year’s split roll property tax initiative, Proposition 15.

Large majorities of Californians agreed with two of the statements posed. By a nearly five-to-one margin (78% to 16%) voters agreed that taxes in California were already so high that they were driving many people and businesses out of the state. And, by a nearly three-to-one margin (56% to 19%) voters felt that the proposed changes to the way commercial and industrial properties were to be taxed under Proposition 15 was only the first step in bringing about similar changes to the way residential properties would be taxed in the future. Opponents of Proposition 15 overwhelmingly concurred with both statements, and even supporters of Proposition 15 tended to agree with each statement.

The poll also found very large differences between supporters or opponents of Proposition 15 with regard to the statement that the additional revenues that the initiative would generate were much needed by the public schools, community colleges and local governments given the revenue losses each was facing due to the coronavirus pandemic. Voters intending to vote Yes on Proposition 15 overwhelmingly agreed with this statement (79% to 8%), while those intending to vote No were nearly as one sided in disagreeing (76% to 13%).

Fewer voters could offer an opinion about a fourth statement stating that when voters originally passed Proposition 13 they did not intend to reduce commercial and industrial property taxes along with those of residential properties. Among the overall electorate 38% agreed with this statement, 16% disagreed and 46% had no opinion. Yet, among voters offering an opinion there were wide differences between supporters and opponents, with those intending to vote Yes on Proposition 15 agreeing with this statement 46% to 6%, while No voters were divided in their opinions about it.

| | Total likely voters % | Voting Yes on Prop. 15 % | Voting No on Prop. 15 % | Undecided on Prop. 15 % |
|---|------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <hr/> | | | | |
| <u>Taxes are already so high that they are driving many people and businesses out of the state</u> | | | | |
| Agree | 78 | 63 | 94 | 79 |
| Disagree | 16 | 29 | 4 | 9 |
| No opinion | 6 | 8 | 2 | 12 |
| | | | | |
| <u>The proposed changes to how commercial and industrial properties are taxed under this year's Proposition 15 ballot initiative are only the first step to making other similar changes to the way residential properties are taxed in the future.</u> | | | | |
| Agree | 56 | 47 | 72 | 32 |
| Disagree | 19 | 24 | 13 | 17 |
| No opinion | 25 | 29 | 15 | 51 |
| | | | | |
| <u>The additional tax revenues that Proposition 15 would bring to the state's public schools, community colleges and local governments are needed given the large revenue losses these institutions are facing as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.</u> | | | | |
| Agree | 47 | 79 | 13 | 42 |
| Disagree | 37 | 8 | 76 | 13 |
| No opinion | 16 | 13 | 11 | 45 |
| | | | | |
| <u>When Proposition 13 was originally approved in 1978 voters never intended to cut the property taxes of commercial and industrial properties, only those of residential properties.</u> | | | | |
| Agree | 38 | 46 | 30 | 26 |
| Disagree | 16 | 6 | 31 | 5 |
| No opinion | 46 | 48 | 39 | 69 |

Historically large proportion believes the level of state and local taxes that the average Californian has to pay is high

Between 1977 and 2008 *The Field Poll* regularly examined Californians’ views about the overall level of state and local taxes that the average person had to pay. In its latest survey the *Berkeley IGS Poll* repeated the same question in an attempt to update this time series.

Results from the latest poll show that more Californians now describe the level of state and local taxes paid by the average Californian as high (81%) than ever before, while just 19% consider them low or about right.

In previous statewide *Field Poll* surveys dating back to 1977 the only other times when more than three in four voters described the level of state and local taxes paid by the average California as high were in 1982 and 1991, both years in which the state was experiencing in an economic downturn.

Table 6
Trend of voter perceptions of the level of state and local taxes
that the average Californian pays (1977 – 2020)*

| | High % | About right /low % | No opinion % |
|-------------|-----------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| 2020 | 81 | 19 | -- |
| 2008 | 61 | 37 | 2 |
| 2007 | 57 | 39 | 4 |
| 2004 | 59 | 40 | 1 |
| 2002 | 62 | 36 | 2 |
| 2001 | 62 | 36 | 2 |
| 1998 | 69 | 30 | 1 |
| 1995 | 56 | 42 | 2 |
| 1993 | 64 | 34 | 2 |
| 1991 | 76 | 22 | 2 |
| 1990 | 61 | 36 | 3 |
| 1988 | 55 | 42 | 3 |
| 1983 | 59 | 38 | 3 |
| 1982 | 78 | 20 | 2 |
| 1980 | 70 | 28 | 2 |
| 1977 | 70 | 27 | 3 |

* 2001-2020 polls conducted among California registered voters, while prior measurements were conducted among California adults. The results of prior year polls from *The Field Poll* as reported in a June 6, 2008 press release issued by Field Research Corporation.

Greater than two in three single out four specific taxes as being high

When asked to consider the level of taxes that the average Californian had to pay in five specific areas, greater than two in three voters described the following state taxes as high -- state gasoline taxes (71%), state income taxes (71%), sales taxes (69%) and property taxes (68%). Only about one in four voters rated the level of taxes in these areas were low or about right.

When asked about taxes in one other area, state taxes on alcoholic beverages, 35% considered them to be high, 43% felt they were low or about right, while 22% had no opinion.

Table 7
Voter perceptions of the level of taxes that the average Californian
paid in five specific areas
(among registered voters)

| | High | About right | No opinion |
|------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| | % | /low | % |
| | % | % | % |
| State taxes on gasoline | 71 | 22 | 7 |
| State income taxes | 71 | 23 | 6 |
| Sales taxes | 69 | 25 | 6 |
| Property taxes | 68 | 23 | 9 |
| State taxes on alcoholic beverages | 35 | 43 | 22 |

About the Survey

The findings in this report are based on a *Berkeley IGS Poll* completed by the Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS) at the University of California, Berkeley. The poll was administered online in English and Spanish October 16-21, 2020 among 6,686 California registered voters, of whom 5,352 were considered likely to vote or had already voted in this year’s election.

The tax questions included in the survey were developed collaboratively with UCB Professor Emeritus Jack Citrin, who also assisted Mr. DiCamillo and The Field Poll when developing earlier question series about Proposition 13 in the years after its passage.

The survey was administered by distributing email invitations to stratified random samples of the state’s registered voters. Each email invited voters to participate in a non-partisan survey conducted by the University and provided a link to the IGS website where the survey was housed. Reminder emails were distributed to non-responding voters and an opt out link was provided for voters not wishing to receive further emails.

Samples of registered voters with email addresses were provided to IGS by Political Data, Inc., a leading supplier of registered voter lists in California and were derived from the state’s official voter registration rolls. Prior to the distribution of emails, the overall sample was

stratified by age and gender in an attempt to obtain a proper balance of survey respondents across major segments of the registered voter population.

To protect the anonymity of survey respondents, voters' email addresses and all other personally identifiable information derived from the original voter listing were purged from the data file and replaced with a unique and anonymous identification number during data processing. In addition, post-stratification weights were applied to align the sample of registered voters responding to the survey to population characteristics of the state's registered voters. Likely voters were identified based on a voter's interest in and intention to vote in the election and factoring in their history of voting in past elections.

The sampling error associated with the results from the survey are difficult to calculate precisely due to the effects of sample stratification and the post-stratification weighting. Nevertheless, it is likely that findings based on the samples of registered voters and the sample of likely voters are subject to a sampling error of approximately +/-2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

Detailed tabulations reporting the results to each question can be found at the *Berkeley IGS Poll* website at <https://www.igs.berkeley.edu/research/berkeley-igs-poll>.

Question wording

ASKED OF LIKELY VOTERS: California's November election ballot includes a number of statewide propositions. For each please indicate how you (would vote if the election were held today) (voted on each of these propositions).

PROPOSITION 15: INCREASES FUNDING SOURCES FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS, COMMUNITY COLLEGES, AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES BY CHANGING TAX ASSESSMENT OF COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL PROPERTY. INITIATIVE CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT. Taxes such properties based on current market value, instead of purchase price. Fiscal impact: Increased property taxes on commercial properties worth more than \$3 million providing \$6.5 billion to \$11.5 billion in new funding to local governments and schools. (If the election were held today how would you vote on Proposition 15?) (How did you vote on Proposition 15?)

ASKED OF ALL REGISTERED VOTERS:

Generally speaking, do you think the level of state and local taxes that the average Californian pays are much too high, somewhat high, about right or low?

How would you rate the level of taxes that the average Californian has to pay in each of the following areas? (ORDERING OF TAXES WAS RANDOMIZED) (SEE RELEASE FOR SPECIFIC TAXES MEASURED)

In 1978 California voters approved Proposition 13, which reduced local property taxes and limited the amount they could be increased each year. How familiar are you with Proposition 13?

Based on what you have seen or heard about Proposition 13, if Proposition 13 were up for a vote again today, do you think you would vote in favor of it or vote against it?

About the Institute of Governmental Studies

The Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS) is an interdisciplinary organized research unit that pursues a vigorous program of research, education, publication and public service. A component of the University of California system's flagship Berkeley campus, IGS is the oldest organized research unit in the UC system and the oldest public policy research center in the state. IGS's co-directors are Professor Eric Schickler and Associate Professor Cristina Mora.

IGS conducts periodic surveys of public opinion in California on matters of politics and public policy through its *Berkeley IGS Poll*. The poll, which is disseminated widely, seeks to provide a broad measure of contemporary public opinion, and to generate data for subsequent scholarly analysis. The director of the *Berkeley IGS Poll* is Mark DiCamillo. For a complete listing of stories issued by the *Berkeley IGS Poll* go to <https://www.igs.berkeley.edu/research/berkeley-igs-poll>.