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California voters offer mixed views about how democracy is working in the state

An early June *Berkeley IGS Poll* conducted among 5,095 California registered voters on behalf of the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund explored voter attitudes toward a wide range of issues about the state's democracy. The following are some of the poll's key findings:

- A majority of the state's voters (52%) describe themselves as at least moderately satisfied with the way democracy is working in California, while 44% are not satisfied. However, opinions divide sharply along partisan and ideological grounds, with majorities of Democrats and liberals saying they are generally satisfied, while eight in ten Republican and conservative voters are not satisfied.
- One of the aspects of the state's democracy that voters are most satisfied with relates to the methods available to them for voting. Greater than eight in ten voters (83%) are satisfied with their voting options, 60% of whom are very satisfied. Just 11% are not satisfied. Voters' most preferred methods for voting in California elections are voting by mail (47%) or by dropping off their ballot in a drop box or at a voting center either before or on Election Day (30%), while 23% prefer voting in person.
- However, Californians express concerns about several aspects of the state's democracy. For example, three in four (75%) say they are concerned about the increasing use of corporate or industry-sponsored referendums to attempt to undo laws passed by the state legislature. Another six in ten (60%) are also concerned about the increasing use of recall elections to remove local and state elected officials from office.
- Also, by a three-to-one margin (64% to 22%) voters support reforming gubernatorial recall elections so that the Lt. Governor becomes governor until the next general election whenever a sitting governor is recalled, at which time a new governor would be chosen by majority vote.
- While most voters feel there are too many issues and election contests to vote on in a typical statewide election, 66% say the length of the ballot is not a factor when deciding whether they will vote; another 22% say that when there are more issues on the ballots this gives them a greater incentive to participate.

"California has stood at the vanguard in expanding ways to vote," said Christian Arana, Vice President of Civic Power and Policy at the Latino Community Foundation. "Whether voting by mail

or voting in person, California voters appreciate the ease of access when exercising their right to vote in elections.”

Eric Schickler, co-director of the Institute of Governmental Studies, added this observation, “California voters offer a mixed evaluation of the state’s democracy. There is broad satisfaction with the methods available for voting, but important concerns about the way the referendum and recall processes are currently being used.”

While a majority of voters are generally satisfied with the way democracy is working in the state, opinions divide sharply along partisan and ideological lines

Slightly more than half of the state’s voters (52%) describe themselves as extremely, somewhat or moderately satisfied with the way the state’s democracy is working, while 44% say they are not too or not at all satisfied.

Partisan and ideological factors dominate these responses. Among Democrats about two in three (63%) are generally satisfied with how democracy is working in the state, while 24% are not satisfied. By contrast, 80% of the state’s Republicans are not satisfied, 67% of whom describe themselves as not at all satisfied. Similar wide differences are observed between self-described liberal and conservative voters, as large majorities of liberals report themselves as being satisfied, while conservatives are overwhelmingly dissatisfied.

Table 1

Satisfaction with the way democracy is working in California

	Extremely or somewhat satisfied	Moderately satisfied	Not too satisfied	Not at all satisfied	No opinion
	%	%	%	%	%
Total registered voters	21	31	14	30	3
<u>Party registration</u>					
Democrats	23	40	14	10	3
Republicans	5	12	13	67	3
No party preference/others	16	32	17	31	4
<u>Political ideology</u>					
Strongly conservative	8	10	11	70	3
Somewhat conservative	11	21	16	51	1
Moderate	20	33	15	27	5
Somewhat liberal	33	45	13	6	3
Strongly liberal	32	37	16	11	3

Voters highly satisfied with the methods available to them to vote in California elections

Californians are generally well satisfied with the options they have for voting, with 60% reporting themselves very satisfied and 23% somewhat satisfied. Just 11% say they are not satisfied with the alternatives they have for voting in the state.

However, satisfaction with voting methods available to Californians varies by party affiliation. While majorities of voters across all party lines express some degree of satisfaction with their voting options, more than twice as many of the state’s Democrats (72%) as Republicans (34%) describe themselves very satisfied.

Satisfaction with voting options is evident among voters of all races and ethnic backgrounds, although comparatively fewer Korean American voters than others describe themselves as very satisfied with the options they have for voting.

Among voters who reported not being satisfied with their voting options, by far the most common reason cited is not believing that voting by mail is reliable (63%), followed by a belief that the period of early voting is too short (13%).

Table 2
How satisfied are you with the options you have for voting in California elections
(among California registered voters)

	Very satisfied %	Somewhat satisfied %	Not satisfied %	No opinion %
Total statewide	60	23	11	6
<u>Party registration</u>				
Democrat	72	19	5	4
Republican	34	27	23	8
No Party Preference/other	54	26	11	9
<u>Race/ethnicity</u>				
White	66	18	11	5
Latino	54	27	10	9
Black/African American	62	19	9	9
Asian American/Pacific Islander (<i>net</i>)	<u>52</u>	<u>31</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>5</u>
Chinese American	51	32	11	5
Vietnamese American	49	27	18	6
Korean American	29	49	16	5
Other AAPI	61	27	8	5

Preferred methods of voting in California

When Californians are asked what method they prefer when voting, most frequently cited are voting by mail (47%) or by dropping off their ballot in a drop box or at their local voting center, either prior to or on Election Day (30%). Another 23% prefer to vote in-person either on or before Election Day.

Voting by mail or by dropping off their ballot are the most preferred methods for voting across all major segments of the voting population, although a larger proportion of Republicans (41%) than other voters say they prefer to vote in person either on or before Election Day. Democrats (54%), seniors (54%), Chinese American (57%) and Korean American (65%) voters are the most likely voter segments to prefer voting by mail. The poll also finds that younger voters are more likely than older voters to prefer dropping off their ballots in a drop box or at their local voting center.

Table 3
What is your preferred method of voting in California elections?
(among voters whose voting record indicates voting participation in recent elections)

	Return by mail %	Drop off in drop box or at voting center* %	In person on Election Day %	In person before Election Day %	Give ballot to another to return %
Total statewide	47	30	18	5	1
<u>Party registration</u>					
Democrat	54	34	9	3	-
Republican	34	24	33	8	2
No Party Preference/other	45	30	18	5	2
<u>Age</u>					
18-29	36	38	16	9	1
30-39	42	36	17	3	2
40-49	44	32	18	5	1
50-64	49	24	21	5	1
65 or older	54	28	15	2	1
<u>Race/ethnicity</u>					
White	49	30	17	4	-
Latino	42	30	20	7	1
Black/African American	44	32	16	6	2
Asian American/Pacific Islander <i>(net)</i>	<u>50</u>	<u>32</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>2</u>
Chinese American	57	30	9	3	1
Vietnamese American	33	31	24	8	4
Korean American	65	19	15	1	-
Other AAPI	42	37	18	3	-

* includes voters who drop off their ballot in a drop box or at a voting center either on or before Election Day

Majorities are concerned about the increasing use of referendums to attempt to undo state legislation, and about the increasing use of recall elections to remove elected officials from office

Three in four voters (75%) describe themselves as very or somewhat concerned about the increasing use of corporate and industry-sponsored referendums to attempt to undo laws passed by the state legislature. While Democrats express the greatest concerns about this topic (88%), majorities of Republicans (55%) and non-partisan voters (71%) also report being concerned about this.

Another six in ten voters (60%) express concerns about the increasing use of recall elections to attempt to remove state and local elected officials from office, while 33% are not concerned. More than twice as Democrats (75%) as Republicans (34%) say they are concerned about this issue.

Table 4
Voter concerns about the increasing use of the initiative by corporate or industry-sponsored groups to attempt to undo state legislation and the increasing use of recall elections to remove state and local elected officials from office
(among California registered voters)

	Very concerned %	Somewhat concerned %	Not concerned %	No opinion %
Concerns about the increasing use of corporate and industry-sponsored referendums to attempt to undo laws passed by the state legislature	48	27	16	9
<u>Party registration</u>				
Democrats	60	28	6	6
Republicans	31	24	32	13
No Party Preference/others	41	30	17	12
Concerns about the increasing use of recall elections to attempt to remove state and local elected officials	30	30	33	7
<u>Party registration</u>				
Democrats	40	35	18	7
Republicans	16	18	63	3
No Party Preference/others	25	31	34	10

Broad support for reforming gubernatorial recall elections so that the Lt. Governor becomes governor until the next general election whenever a sitting governor is recalled

By a three-to-one margin (64% to 22%), voters support a reform proposal aimed at changing state law relating to gubernatorial recall elections. Under current law voters are asked to select the new governor in a replacement election at the same time they are deciding whether to recall a sitting governor from office. Under the reform proposal, if voters in a recall election choose to oust a sitting governor from office, the lieutenant governor would become governor until the next general election at which point voters would choose the next governor by majority vote.

Three in four Democrats (74%) favor this proposal, while somewhat smaller majorities of Republicans (51%) and non-partisans (59%) back this change.

“Californians of all political parties are fed up with frivolous recalls that waste taxpayers’ money and voters’ time,” said Jonathan Mehta Stein, Executive Director of California Common Cause. “We need to preserve the recall for when it is truly necessary and end the era of recall-as-political-football.”

Table 5

**Support/Oppose: Reform California’s recall election laws so that if a sitting governor is recalled, the Lt. Governor becomes governor until the next general election, at which point the next governor would be elected by majority vote
(among California registered voters)**

	Support %	Oppose %	No opinion %
Total registered voters	64	22	14
<u>Party registration</u>			
Democrats	74	13	13
Republicans	51	40	9
No party preference/other	59	24	17

Most voters feel there are too many issues and election contests to vote on in a typical statewide election

A majority of California voters (53%) agree that there are too many issues and election contests for voters to vote on in a typical statewide election.

Larger proportions of Latino voters (60%) and Asian American or Pacific Islander voters (63%) than white (47%) or Black voters (44%) express concern about this issue. In addition, voters whose voting record indicates that they vote less frequently (61%) are also more likely to feel there are too many issues and election contests to vote on in a typical statewide election.

Table 6

**Agree/Disagree: “In a typical statewide election in California there are too many issues and election contests for voters to vote on.”
(among California registered voters)**

	Agree %	Disagree %	No opinion %
Total registered voters	53	35	12
<u>Frequency of voting in elections</u>			
Regular voter	46	46	9
Intermittent voter	55	32	13
Infrequent voter	61	26	13
<u>Race/ethnicity</u>			
White	47	43	10
Latino	60	27	13
Black/African American	44	39	17
Asian American/Pacific Islander (<i>net</i>)	<u>63</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>12</u>
Chinese American	56	31	13
Vietnamese American	66	20	14
Korean American	72	22	6
Other AAPI	65	23	12

Yet, 66% say the length of the ballot is not a factor when considering whether they will vote, and 22% say that more issues on the ballot makes them more likely to vote

Even though most voters feel there are too many issues to vote on in a typical California election, two in three (66%) say the length of the ballot is not a factor when considering whether they will vote. In

addition, 22% say that when election ballots include many issues this gives them a greater incentive to participate. Only 7% say that elections that have longer ballots with more issues to vote on makes them less likely to vote.

White voters (79%) and those who vote regularly (77%) are more likely than others to say the length of the ballot is not a factor when considering whether to vote. Larger proportions of Latino, Vietnamese American, and Korean American voters say that when there are many issues to decide upon, it makes them more likely to participate.

Table 7
**Are you more likely or less likely to vote in elections where there are
a larger number of issues and election contests to vote on?
(among registered voters who have voted in recent statewide elections)**

	More likely %	Less likely %	Not a factor %	No opinion %
Total registered voters	22	7	66	5
<u>Frequency of voting in elections</u>				
Regular voter	20	2	77	1
Intermittent voter	24	11	61	5
Infrequent voter	24	12	54	11
<u>Race/ethnicity</u>				
White	15	3	79	2
Latino	34	10	49	7
Black/African American	26	13	54	6
Asian American/Pacific Islander (<i>net</i>)	<u>22</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>57</u>	<u>8</u>
Chinese American	15	14	61	10
Vietnamese American	35	8	50	7
Korean American	38	16	36	10
Other AAPI	19	12	62	6

About the Survey

The findings in this report are based on a statewide *Berkeley IGS Poll* completed by the Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS) at the University of California, Berkeley on behalf of the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund. The poll was administered online May 29-June 4, 2024, in five languages, English, Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean, among 5,095 Californians registered to vote.

The poll was conducted 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 voters with a link to the IGS website where the survey was housed. To accommodate non-English language voters, voters whose voting record indicated that they preferred to have their voting materials sent to them in a Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese or Korean were sent their email invitations in-language asking them to choose which language they preferred to complete the survey. Reminder emails were distributed to non-responding voters and an opt out link was provided for voters not wishing to receive further email invitations. Voter email addresses were derived from public information contained on the state’s voter registration rolls and were provided to IGS by Political Data, Inc., a leading supplier of registered voter lists in California.

To protect the anonymity of respondents, each voter’s email address and all other personally identifiable information included on their voting record were purged from the data file and replaced with an anonymous identification number during data processing. After the completion of data collection,

post-stratification weights were applied to align the sample to population characteristics of the overall registered vote statewide, and where possible, within each of the state's major regions. While the sampling error associated with the survey results is difficult to calculate precisely because of sample stratification and weighting, it is likely that findings based on the overall sample are subject to a sampling error of approximately +/-2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

Question wording

On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in California?

How concerned are you about the increasing use of referendums placed on the election ballot by large corporations and industry trade groups to undo laws passed by the state legislature?

How concerned are you about the increasing use of recall elections at both the state and local level to attempt to remove elected officials from office?

Would you support or oppose reforming California's recall election laws so that if a sitting governor is recalled from office, the lieutenant governor becomes governor until the next general election, at which point the next governor would be elected by majority vote, rather than holding a replacement election to choose the next governor at the same time as the recall election, as is currently done?

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: In a typical statewide election in California there are too many issues and election contests for voters to vote on.

Generally speaking, are you more likely or less likely to vote in elections where there are a large number of issues and election contests to vote on, or is this usually not a factor in whether or not you will vote?

Which of the following methods do you prefer to use when voting in California elections?

How satisfied are you with the options that you have for voting by mail or in person in California elections? (IF DISSATISFIED) Which of the following are reasons why you aren't satisfied with the options you have for voting? (SEE SURVEY TABULATIONS FOR REASONS LISTED)

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 California public opinion in California on matters of politics and public policy through its *Berkeley IGS Poll*. The poll seeks to provide broad measures of contemporary public opinion and generate data for scholarly analysis. Veteran pollster Mark DiCamillo serves as director of the *Berkeley IGS Poll*. For a complete listing of reports issued by the poll, please visit <https://www.igs.berkeley.edu/research/berkeley-igs-poll>.

About the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund

The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund works to advance equality and justice so every person can thrive and live life with dignity and hope. Rooted in the Bay Area, it focuses on a set of issues that include building a fairer, more representative democracy in California; advancing more humane approaches to immigration and expanding opportunities for immigrant youth and families; and making higher education more affordable for lower-income California students. It has awarded over \$695 million in grants since its founding in 1953.