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Author

DiCamillo, Mark

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

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Three in four Californians see the threat of wildfire as now much more serious than in the past

66% believe climate change is a major factor contributing to the growing number of wildfires, but partisanship colors perceptions

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

Three in four of the state's registered voters (74%) believe the threat that wildfires now pose to the state of California is much more serious than it has been in the past. This view is shared by large majorities of voters in all major regions of the state.

Over a third (38%) also feel it is highly likely that wildfires will cause serious damage to the homes in their local area within the next ten years. This includes 8% who say wildfires have already caused serious damage to area homes and 30% who see this as extremely or very likely to occur sometime in the next decade. Among voters living in the predominantly rural and sparsely populated counties of Northern California outside the San Francisco Bay Area and Central Valley, 62% hold to this view.

Two in three California voters (66%) believe climate change is a major factor contributing to the greater number of wildfires in the state in recent years. This view is shared by majorities of voters in all major regions of the state, although there are large differences in views about this by party and political ideology.

While nine in ten Democrats (90%) see climate change as a major contributing factor to the increasing number of wildfires, just 19% of Republicans feel this way, and nearly half (46%) think it is not a factor at all. Similarly, while nearly all liberals view climate change as a major contributing factor to the growing wildfire threat, only small proportions of very conservative (14%) or somewhat conservative (28%) voters say this. What's more, among voters describing themselves as very conservative 61% feel climate change is not at all related to the increasing number of wildfires.

In addition, a 54% majority of Californians have little confidence in government's ability to protect their local area from the threat of wildfire. In a rare show of political unity, Californians' view that government may not be up to the task is bipartisan and includes majorities or pluralities of voters of all political ideologies.

IGS co-Director Eric Schickler commented, “Californians now see wildfires as a serious threat to the state’s future. Given the increasing scale of the problem, it is not surprising that voters are skeptical that politicians at all levels of government are not up to the task of meeting this challenge. But the state’s future depends on putting together a response that at least mitigates the dangers.”

Three in four see the wildfire threat as much more serious than in the past

Three in four voters (74%) believe the threat that wildfires now pose to the state of California is much more serious than it has been in the past. Another 15% feel the wildfire threat is somewhat more serious now than in the past, and just 10% feel it is about the same. The perception that the state now faces a much more serious threat from wildfires than ever before is shared by large majorities of voters in all major regions of the state and by 85% of those living in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Voters were also asked to compare the current threat that wildfires pose in their own local area compared to the past. In this setting a somewhat smaller proportion (41%) describes the wildfire threat as being much more serious than in the past, although there are wide differences of views about this depending on where voters live. For example, nearly two in three of voters living in the predominantly rural and sparsely populated counties of Northern California outside the San Francisco Bay Area and Central Valley (63%) believe the wildfire threat to their local area is now much more serious than in the past. By comparison, fewer than one in four voters in Orange County (23%) say this.

Table 1
Voter perceptions of the threat of wildfire in California
and in their own local area now compared to the past
(among California registered voters)

	Threat to California now			Threat to own local area now		
	Much more serious %	Somewhat more serious %	About the same %	Much more serious %	Somewhat more serious %	About the same %
Total statewide	74	15	10	41	29	30
<u>Region</u>						
Los Angeles County	72	17	11	35	28	37
San Diego County	62	22	15	32	32	35
Orange County	68	17	16	23	30	47
Inland Empire	67	17	16	36	29	35
Other Southern California	73	16	10	44	27	28
Central Valley	77	14	9	46	27	27
San Francisco Bay Area	85	10	4	51	30	18
Other Northern California*	78	17	6	63	28	10

Note: In this and succeeding tables, percentages may add to slightly more or less than 100% due to rounding.

** Other Northern California includes Lake, Mendocino, Trinity, Humboldt, Del Norte, Siskiyou, Modoc, Lassen, Plumas, Sierra, Nevada, Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Tuolumne, Mariposa and Mono counties.*

Greater than one in three believe it’s highly likely that wildfires will cause serious damage to the homes in their area within the next ten years

Fully 38% of the state’s registered voters now believe it is highly likely that wildfires will cause serious damage to the homes in their local area within the next ten years. This includes 8% who say wildfires have already caused serious damage to their area’s homes and 30% who believe this is as extremely or very likely to occur in the next decade.

Voters living in parts of Northern California outside the Bay Area or the Central Valley are much more likely to say this, with 62% saying this is highly likely to occur, including 23% who say it already has and just 11% saying this is not likely to occur.

Half (50%) of the voters living in the four-county region of Southern California beyond the Southland’s heavily populated counties of Los Angeles, Orange, San Diego, Riverside and San Bernardino also feel this way.

Table 2
Likelihood that wildfires will cause serious damage to the homes in your local area within the next ten years (among California registered voters)

	Already has %	Extremely or very likely %	Somewhat likely %	Not likely %
Total statewide	8	30	30	32
<u>Region</u>				
Los Angeles County	6	27	29	38
San Diego County	6	35	37	22
Orange County	3	24	29	44
Inland Empire	6	30	32	32
Other Southern California	15	35	25	25
Central Valley	9	29	28	33
San Francisco Bay Area	8	34	30	28
Other Northern California	23	39	27	11

Two in three believe climate change is a major factor contributing to the state’s increasing wildfires

Two in three California voters (66%) believe climate change is a major factor contributing to the greater number of wildfires in the state in recent years. This view is shared by majorities of voters in all major regions of the state.

However, there are pronounced partisan and ideological differences in views about this. For example, 90% of Democrats and 68% of No Party Preference voters see climate change as a major contributing factor to the recent increase in the state’s wildfires. This contrasts with the views of registered Republicans of whom just 19% see climate change as a major

contributing factor to the growing number of wildfires, and nearly half (46%) believing climate change is not a factor at all.

Similarly, the view that climate change is a major factor contributing to the increasing number of wildfires is nearly universally held among liberal voters, but among conservatives only small proportions of voters say this. What’s more, of the Californians who describe themselves as very conservative in politics 61% think climate change is not at all related to the state’s increasing number of recent wildfires.

Table 3
How much of a factor do you believe climate change is in contributing to the greater number of wildfires in California in recent years
(among California registered voters)

	<u>Major factor</u> %	<u>Minor factor</u> %	<u>Not a factor</u> %
Total statewide	66	19	15
<u>Region</u>			
Los Angeles County	70	18	11
San Diego County	66	19	16
Orange County	57	25	17
Inland Empire	58	21	21
Other Southern California	63	16	20
Central Valley	55	22	22
San Francisco Bay Area	77	14	9
Other Northern California	66	16	18
<u>Party registration</u>			
Democrats	90	9	2
Republicans	19	34	46
No Party Preference/others	68	22	10
<u>Political ideology</u>			
Very conservative	14	25	61
Somewhat conservative	28	36	36
Moderate	68	22	10
Somewhat liberal	89	10	1
Very liberal	96	3	1

Little confidence in government’s ability to protect their local area from the threat of wildfire

A 54% majority of Californians say they are not too or not at all confident in the federal, state and local government’s ability to protect their local area from the threat of wildfire. Just 10% who have a high degree of confidence and 36% who have some confidence.

Voters living in Northern California counties outside the Bay Area or the Central Valley, where the perceived threat of wildfires is greatest, are the most skeptical, with 66% expressing little confidence in government’s ability to protect their local area from wildfires.

In a rare show of political unity, Californians’ lack of confidence in government’s ability to protect their area from the wildfire threat is bipartisan and includes majorities or pluralities of voters of all political ideologies.

Table 4
Confidence in federal, state and local government in being able to protect your local area from the threat of wildfire
(among California registered voters)

	Not too / not at all confident %	Somewhat confident %	Extremely/ very confident %
Total statewide	54	36	10
<u>Region</u>			
Los Angeles County	51	36	13
San Diego County	48	42	10
Orange County	45	43	12
Inland Empire	54	35	12
Other Southern California	57	33	9
Central Valley	58	34	7
San Francisco Bay Area	58	34	8
Other Northern California	66	29	5
<u>Party registration</u>			
Democrats	50	40	10
Republicans	60	27	12
No Party Preference/others	54	37	9
<u>Political ideology</u>			
Very conservative	63	25	12
Somewhat conservative	59	30	11
Moderate	50	39	10
Somewhat liberal	48	43	9
Very liberal	58	33	8

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 September 9-15, 2020 among 7,198 California registered voters.

The survey was administered by distributing email invitations to stratified random samples of the state's registered voters. The 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 information contained on the 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.

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 from the overall registered voter sample 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

Thinking about the threat that wildfires now pose to the state of California compared to the past. Would you describe the threat as much more serious, somewhat more serious, or about the same as it has been in the past?

And, how would you describe the threat that wildfires now pose to your own local area compared to the past? Would you describe the threat as much more serious, somewhat more serious, or about the same as it has been in the past?

How likely do you feel it is that over the next ten years wildfires will cause serious damage to the homes in your local area?

How confident are you that over the next ten years the federal, state and local government will be able to protect your local area from the threat of wildfires?

Do you think climate change is a major factor, a minor factor or not a factor contributing to the greater number of wildfires that have taken place in California in recent years?

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>.