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Author

DiCamillo, Mark

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Institute of Governmental Studies
102 Philosophy Hall, #2370
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720-2370
Tel: 510-642-1473
Email: igs@berkeley.edu

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Three candidates -- Becerra, Hilton and Steyer -- are now separating themselves from the crowded field in next week's primary election for governor

by Mark DiCamillo
Director, *Berkeley IGS Poll*

In one of the most unusual gubernatorial primary election campaigns in modern California history, three candidates have emerged atop the crowded field in the race to succeed Gavin Newsom as the state's next governor.

The latest *Berkeley IGS Poll* completed May 19-24 among a sample of over 5,000 likely voters finds former state Attorney General and U.S. Health Secretary Xavier Becerra in the lead at 25%, followed by Republican political commentator and small business owner Steve Hilton at 21% but with Democratic activist and venture capital founder Tom Steyer within striking distance at 19%. The top two vote getters in the primary will face off against one another in the November general election.

Three other candidates trail, including Riverside County Sheriff Republican Chad Bianco at 11%, former Congresswoman Democrat Katie Porter (7%) and Democratic San Jose Mayor Matt Mahan (4%). None of the 46 other candidates listed on the June primary election ballot and who were included in the latest poll received more than 1% of the preferences, while 7% of voters did not offer a preference.

The poll finds Hilton leading among voters who had already cast their ballots during the polling period, which ended about one week before the election, receiving 29% of their votes, while 20% said they chose Becerra, 17% voted for Steyer and 15% for Bianco. Yet, among the much larger share of likely voters who had yet to cast their ballots, Becerra leads with 26%, followed by both Hilton and Steyer who each receive 19%, while Bianco and Porter are both further back.

Voter preferences diverge quite a bit across the state's major regions. Becerra holds the lead among voters in the state's largest region, Los Angeles County, while Hilton leads in Orange County, the Central Valley and the state's sparsely populated North Coast/Sierras region. Steyer does best among voters in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he and Becerra are running about evenly. Bianco leads in the Inland Empire, which includes Riverside County, where he serves as Sheriff.

IGS co-director Eric Schickler commented that "this has been a wide-open and very unusual race. While voter preferences have clarified some since our last poll, there is still a fair amount of uncertainty about which of the top three candidates will make the November ballot. Much now depends on turnout and whether those who prefer one of the lower polling candidates end up tilting toward one of the polling leaders."

Changes in voter support for the candidates since early March

Support for Becerra expanded significantly after Democratic Congressman Eric Swalwell, who was among the early leaders, withdrew from the race and resigned his position in Congress after allegations surfaced of a scandal involving sexual misconduct. In the *Berkeley IGS Poll's* last poll completed in early March while Swalwell was still a candidate, Becerra was receiving only 5% support among the state's likely voters, whereas today he is backed by 25%. Over this same period Hilton and Steyer have steadily improved their standing in the race, with Hilton increasing his support base from 17% to 21% and Steyer nearly doubling his support from 10% to 19%. By contrast, support for both Bianco and Porter has declined significantly among the likely voters polled, as Bianco's current 11% standing is down from 16% in early March, while support for Porter has declined from 13% to 7%.

Table 1
**Likely voter preferences for governor in California's June primary election
(now vs. early March)**

	Late May %	Early March %
Xavier Becerra , voting rights advocate (D)	25	5
Steve Hilton , small business owner (R)	21	17
Tom Steyer , climate advocate (D)	19	10
Chad Bianco , Riverside County Sheriff (R)	11	16
Katie Porter , consumer protection advocate (D)	7	13
Matt Mahan , Mayor of San Jose (D)	4	4
Antonio Villaraigosa , housing affordability advocate (D)	1	4
Tony Thurmond , California State Senate Superintendent of Public Instruction (D)	1	1
Others	4*	16**
Undecided	7	14

*(D) denotes Democrat, (R) denotes Republican. * Each of the 43 other candidates for governor were listed in the poll, but none received more than 1% of likely voter preferences. ** includes 13% support for former Congressman Eric Swalwell, who dropped out of the race after the completion of the early March poll.*

To whom would Bianco, Porter and Mahan supporters turn if they instead decided to back one of the polling leaders

Thus far both the number and share of early votes cast in the governor's race by the state's Democratic registrants has been low by historical standards, as many are either uninspired by their choices or finding it more difficult than usual to come to a final decision among the crowded field of candidates. Most observers expect these voters will eventually pull the trigger and cast their vote in the final days of the campaign. But as support for the trailing candidates has declined, some now speculate that some of those who favor the lower polling candidates could decide to change their vote and instead cast their ballot for a candidate who has a better chance finishing among top two leaders, and who would then move on to compete in the November general election.

To evaluate this possibility, the latest poll asked the supporters of each candidate their second-choice preference. The results reveal that Hilton is in position to broaden his support should voters now favoring Bianco choose to change their vote choice, as 70% of his backers prefer Hilton as their second choice. The picture is less clear when examining the second-choice preferences of Porter's voters, with 39% saying they would favor Becerra and 31% Steyer as their second choice. Supporters of Mahan also give a slight edge to Becerra over the others as their second choice.

Table 2

**2nd choice preferences of voters currently supporting three of the lower polling candidates
(among likely voters who had not yet voted)**

	Bianco supporters %	Porter supporters %	Mahan supporters %
Hilton	70	*	8
Becerra	1	37	28
Steyer	*	31	18
Bianco	--	*	4
Porter	*	--	16
Mahan	3	11	--
Others/no preference	26	21	26

* Less than ½ of 1%

Another question in the poll assessed the impact that President Donald Trump’s endorsement of Hilton had on the state’s Republican voters. The results indicate that Hilton benefited from the endorsement, with 37% of likely GOP voters saying it made them more likely to back Hilton, while just 6% said it made them less likely to back him. The rest (57%) said it had no effect or offered no opinion.

Voter preferences for governor across major subgroups of the primary electorate

The poll finds wide differences in voter support for the candidates across party and ideological lines, with Becerra and Steyer both polling well among Democrats and liberals, while the state’s Republicans and conservatives are mostly dividing their preferences between Hilton and Bianco. Voters not affiliated with either major party divide about evenly among the three leading candidates. Interestingly, among the state’s large bloc of self-identified progressive voters, who have been a key target of the Steyer campaign, the poll finds Becerra leading Steyer 39% to 29%.

Hilton holds a significant lead among voters who had already cast their ballots during the polling period which ended about one week before the election. Among these early voters 29% said they voted for Hilton, 20% chose Becerra, 17% voted for Steyer and 15% for Bianco. Yet, those who had yet to cast their ballots, which represented over 80% of the likely voters in this poll, Becerra is the leader at 26%, followed by both Hilton and Steyer who both receive 19%.

The poll finds significant differences in voter preferences across major regions of the state. Becerra leads among voters in Los Angeles County, the state’s most populous region, while Hilton leads in Orange County, the Central Valley and the sparsely populated North Coast/Sierras region. Steyer does best among voters in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area, a Democratic stronghold, where he and Becerra are running about evenly. Bianco leads among voters in the Inland Empire east of Los Angeles, which includes Riverside County, where he serves as Sheriff.

Becerra leads both among the state’s Latinos and its Asian American voters. Becerra is running even with Hilton among white voters, while Steyer leads among the state’s Black voters.

Male voters are evenly split among the three leading candidates, while Becerra is leading among females. Becerra’s vote support is broad-based among voters across all age segments. By contrast, Hilton polls much better among older voters than younger and middle-aged voters, while the reverse is true for Steyer, who is receiving greater support from younger voters than middle-aged or older voters.

Becerra and Hilton also lead among homeowners, while Becerra and Steyer lead among renters.

Table 3

Voter preferences for governor across subgroups of the likely primary electorate

	Becerra (D) %	Hilton (R) %	Steyer (D) %	Bianco (R) %	Porter (D) %	Mahan (D) %	Others %	Undecided %
Total likely voters	25	21	19	11	7	4	6	7
<u>Voting status</u>								
Voted early (thru 5/24)	20	29	17	15	6	5	5	2
Haven't voted yet	26	19	19	10	8	4	6	8
<u>Party registration</u>								
Democrats	39	1	28	1	12	5	6	8
Republicans	1	59	1	30	*	1	4	3
No Party Pref./other	21	21	20	11	5	6	7	8
<u>Political ideology</u>								
Strongly conservative	2	62	1	31	*	*	3	2
Somewhat conservative	4	54	3	26	1	2	6	3
Moderate	23	18	19	12	5	8	5	9
Somewhat liberal	43	1	22	1	12	7	5	10
Strongly liberal	37	*	35	*	13	2	6	6
<u>Other political identifiers</u>								
Progressive	39	3	29	2	12	3	6	7
MAGA	1	65	*	28	*	*	4	2
Libertarian	17	35	12	16	4	3	9	5
<u>Region</u>								
Los Angeles County	30	16	22	6	6	5	8	7
San Diego County	23	21	18	11	7	5	7	9
Orange County	19	35	15	9	8	4	3	7
Inland Empire	25	13	10	34	11	2	2	4
Central Coast	23	22	24	12	5	5	5	4
Central Valley	23	29	14	14	6	3	7	4
San Francisco Bay Area	28	16	26	4	8	6	3	9
North Coast/Sierras	10	26	14	22	12	*	5	11
<u>Age</u>								
18-29	25	6	22	16	4	2	11	13
30-39	21	9	25	11	9	4	9	12
40-49	26	15	17	19	8	3	4	8
50-64	22	20	19	13	7	5	6	7
65 or older	27	28	18	7	7	5	4	4
<u>Gender</u>								
Male	22	21	21	13	7	5	5	6
Female	29	21	17	10	8	4	5	7
<u>Race/ethnicity</u>								
White	24	23	19	11	9	5	4	4
Latino	28	18	16	16	4	2	10	6
Asian/Pacific Isle	27	15	18	8	6	3	8	15
Black/African Amer.	20	13	29	6	7	4	12	10
<u>Tenure</u>								
Homeowners	26	25	18	12	6	5	3	5
Renters/others	23	14	22	10	10	3	9	9

The sum of subgroup percentages may add to slightly more or less than 100% due to rounding. * less than 1/2 of 1%

Voters cite a wide range of issues as being *very important* to their voting decisions

Voters were then presented with a list of 12 major issues facing the state and asked how important each was to them when considering whom to support for governor in the primary election. Two issues top the list. These include: “defending democracy and protecting voting rights,” whom 80% rate as very important issues, and “reducing the cost of living in California” (74%).

About two in three voters also rated four other issues as being very important to their voting decisions -- “improving education and the public schools” (69%), “dealing with the problem of homelessness” (66%), “public safety and crime prevention” (65%), and “promoting economic development and job creation” (63%). Another 57% of voters cite “fighting Trump administration policies” as a very important voting issue.

Nearly all voters supporting the major Democrats candidates consider defending democracy/ protecting voting rights and fighting Trump administration policies as very important issues, while nearly all voters supporting the two Republicans say the state’s high cost of living is very important to them. Yet, majorities of the voters supporting each of the major candidates, both Democratic and Republican, rate both as very important voting issues.

There are much wider differences between voters supporting leading Democratic candidates and the leading Republican candidates regarding several of the other issues included in the survey. For example, while virtually none of the voters supporting the Republican candidates say fighting Trump administration policies is a very important voting issue, nearly nine in ten of the backers of the leading Democratic candidates consider this issue very important.

Two other issues, “protecting immigrant communities” and “combating climate change,” are much more important to voters supporting the leading Democratic candidates than the leading Republican candidates.

The reverse is true regarding the issues of “public safety and crime prevention,” “cutting taxes,” and “reducing government red tape,” which much larger proportions of those supporting the Republican candidates than those backing the Democratic candidates consider very important.

However, large majorities of voters of all political stripes consider a candidate’s stand on several other issues as being very important to them when deciding whom to support for governor. These include “improving education and the public schools,” “dealing with the problem of homelessness,” and “promoting economic development.”

Table 4

Proportions of likely voters who rate each of twelve issues as being very important to them when considering whom to support for Governor

	Total likely voters %	Becerra voters %	Hilton voters %	Steyer voters %	Bianco voters %	Porter voters %	Mahan voters %	Backing others %	Undecided voters %
Defending democracy and protecting voting rights	80	94	59	90	61	93	74	80	84
Reducing the cost of living in California	74	66	82	70	88	63	69	85	66
Improving education and the public schools	69	74	64	70	64	74	68	77	67
Dealing with the problem of homelessness	66	67	68	64	66	60	57	79	64
Public safety and crime prevention	65	55	94	46	94	38	68	64	54
Promoting economic development and job creation	63	65	69	58	61	53	64	66	56
Fighting Trump administration policies	57	91	*	87	1	86	66	63	71
Reducing government red tape	51	32	83	36	76	38	53	49	37
Cutting taxes	49	28	86	28	84	23	41	50	38
Combating climate change	47	73	3	73	4	71	48	55	56
Protecting immigrant communities	46	74	3	68	5	66	37	70	50
Promoting housing development	41	47	27	50	26	49	43	57	42

* Less than 1/2 of 1%

Changes in voter impressions of the gubernatorial candidates since early March

Compared to voter assessments two months ago when the last *Berkeley IGS Poll* was conducted, many more voters now offer an opinion of Becerra (82%), an increase of 30 points since early March. In addition, more voters now view him favorably (44%) than unfavorably (38%). By contrast, nearly a third of likely voters (31%) still are unable to offer an opinion of Hilton, little changed from two months ago. And, among voters offering an opinion, assessments of Hilton remain slightly more negative (38%) than positive (31%). The poll finds more voters now able to offer an opinion of Steyer (82%), up 16 points since early March. However, his image ratings remain slightly underwater, with 39% viewing him favorably and 43% unfavorably.

More voters have also formed an opinion of Bianco and Porter over the past two months, but both receive more negative than positive assessments. On the other hand, Mahan is still largely unknown to many likely voters, with 41% unable to offer an assessment, although among those who can rate him, more voters (32%) rate him favorably than unfavorably (27%).

There are usual wide partisan differences in the image ratings that voters have of the candidates, with Democratic voters rating each of the Democratic candidates much more positively than do GOP voters, while the reverse is true regarding voter assessments of Republican voters.

Table 5

Voter recognition and image ratings of the major gubernatorial candidates
now compared to last March

	Late May 2026 %	March 2026 %	Party Registration					
			Democrats		Republicans		No party pref./other	
			May '26 %	Mar '26 %	May '26 %	Mar '26 %	May '26 %	Mar '26 %
<u>Xavier Becerra</u>								
Favorable	44	26	66	42	5	3	40	22
Unfavorable	38	26	16	7	77	59	40	22
No opinion	18	48	18	51	18	38	20	56
<u>Steve Hilton</u>								
Favorable	31	28	5	3	82	73	29	24
Unfavorable	38	36	55	55	6	7	39	34
No opinion	31	36	40	42	12	20	33	41
<u>Tom Steyer</u>								
Favorable	39	29	57	44	7	4	38	30
Unfavorable	43	37	25	19	76	70	43	33
No opinion	18	34	18	37	17	26	19	37
<u>Chad Bianco</u>								
Favorable	31	28	4	3	81	71	30	23
Unfavorable	47	33	67	49	10	8	48	33
No opinion	22	39	28	48	9	21	22	44
<u>Katie Porter</u>								
Favorable	38	34	59	54	4	3	33	31
Unfavorable	43	37	23	18	79	69	44	35
No opinion	19	29	18	28	17	28	23	34
<u>Matt Mahan</u>								
Favorable	32	15	37	20	20	8	35	15
Unfavorable	27	21	19	11	42	41	28	17
No opinion	41	64	44	69	38	51	37	68
<u>Antonio Villaraigosa</u>								
Favorable	19	20	26	30	6	7	17	29
Unfavorable	40	34	28	22	64	56	39	30
No opinion	41	46	46	48	30	37	44	51
<u>Tony Thurmond</u>								
Favorable	14	11	21	19	5	1	9	9
Unfavorable	22	27	11	10	42	58	24	22
No opinion	64	62	68	71	54	41	67	69

The image scores of each candidate may add to slightly more or less than 100% due to rounding

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 conducted online in English and Spanish May 19-24, 2026, among 8,578 registered voters in California, 5,472 of whom were considered likely to vote in the state's June primary election. To enable the survey to obtain voter preferences in the Los Angeles mayoral primary election, the survey also included an oversampling of registered voters in the city of Los Angeles. After the conclusion of data collection, the survey results were weighted to return the disproportionate sampling of L.A. City voters to its actual share of the state's registered voter population. Funding for the poll was provided in part by the *Los Angeles Times*.

Data collection was completed by distributing email and text message invitations to stratified random samples of the state's registered voters. Each email or text invited voters to participate in a non-partisan survey conducted by the University and provided a link to the IGS website where the survey questionnaire was housed. Reminders were distributed to non-responding voters and an opt out link was provided for voters not wishing to receive further invitations.

Samples of the state's registered voters 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 state's voter registration rolls, which is a public document. The samples were stratified by age and gender to obtain a proper balance of survey respondents. A separate random sample of Spanish-speakers was drawn from the pool of registered voters who requested that their official voting materials be sent to them in Spanish to enable the survey to assess voter opinions among the state's Spanish-speaking voters.

To protect the anonymity of respondents, voters' email addresses, cell phone numbers and all other personally identifiable information of each voter on their voting record was purged from the data file and replaced with a unique and anonymous identification number during data processing. After the completion of data collection, post-stratification weights were applied to the data file to align the sample to population characteristics of registered voters both statewide and within major regions of the state.

The sampling error associated with the survey results is difficult to calculate precisely because of sample stratification and post-stratification weighting. Nevertheless, it is likely that findings from the overall likely voter sample have a sampling error of about +/- 2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

Question wording

A total of 61 candidates are listed on the primary election ballot for governor. Below is a complete listing of the candidates in alphabetic order sorted by party. (*IF ALREADY VOTED*: For whom did you vote?)

(*IF NOT VOTED YET*: If the election were held today, for whom would you vote for Governor of California? (*IF UNDECIDED*: Listed below are the eight top candidates for Governor. Which candidate do you lean toward supporting?)" (*IF PREFERENCE GIVEN*: Who would be your second choice?)

When considering the candidates running for Governor of California in this election, how important were each of the following issues to you? (*SEE RELEASE FOR ISSUES MEASURED*)

Regardless of whom you supported for Governor, is your opinion of each of the top candidates generally favorable or unfavorable, or do you not know enough about them to say? (*ORDERING RANDOMIZED*)

(*ASKED OF REPUBLICAN VOTERS*) President Trump endorsed Steve Hilton in the California primary election for Governor. What impact (did) (does) President Trump's endorsement of Hilton have on you?

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 Professor G. 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. Veteran pollster Mark DiCamillo serves as director of the *Berkeley IGS Poll*. For a complete listing of stories issued by the *Berkeley IGS Poll* go to <https://www.igs.berkeley.edu/research/berkeley-igs-poll>.