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Release #2020-27: The profound changes that have occurred in the California electorate over the past thirty years

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9156t1hq>

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Publication Date

2020-11-03



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Release #2020-27

Tuesday, November 3, 2020

**The profound changes that have occurred in the California electorate
over the past thirty years.**

A comparison of the California electorate in 1990 to what it is today.

by Mark DiCamillo*
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Over the past thirty years, California has witnessed profound changes in the composition of its electorate. These have in turn produced major shifts in the preferences of its voters in presidential elections.

According to the California Secretary of State, between 1990 and this year the state's voter registration rolls grew by about 8.5 million. However, this growth was not at all distributed evenly across the political parties. There has been virtually no increase in the number of registered Republicans over the period, with the number of its voters remaining at about 5.3 million. By contrast, the number of registered Democrats increased by about 3.5 million to 10.2 million, and the number of No Party Preference increased by 4.1 million to now include 5.3 million voters.

These changes in party loyalties were closely tied to the racial and ethnic transformation that has been taking place among California voters. An analysis of the state's registered voters by the *Berkeley IGS Poll* projects that Latinos and Asian Americans accounted for about 82% of the 8.5 million increase in voters since 1990. And, according to the latest *Berkeley IGS Poll* a large majority of the state's Latino and Asian American voters are currently registered as Democrats or No Party Preference voters, and only small proportions are registered Republicans.

By comparison, thirty years ago whites accounted for 79% of all voters in California and there was a more even division between Democrats and Republicans among the overall electorate. With Republicans more likely than Democratic registrants to turn out in elections, the GOP held the advantage in most statewide elections.

* Mr. DiCamillo formerly served as Director of The (California) Field Poll from 1994-2016 and prior to that served as its Assistant Director under Mervin Field for sixteen years.

IGS co-Director G. Cristina Mora notes that “for a time the state Republican Party was able to make gains in statewide elections relying on the heavy turnout of white voters. This culminated with the re-election of Republican Pete Wilson as governor in 1994, and with the passage of some of the nation’s toughest anti-immigration laws, including Proposition 187.”

Yet, a look at the historical record in presidential elections shows that prior to 1992 California voted reliably Republican in presidential elections, with the GOP nominee carrying the state in nine of the previous ten elections dating back to 1948. (The lone exception being President Lyndon Johnson’s re-election victory in 1964.) However, from 1992 on, California has voted decidedly blue in presidential elections with the Democratic nominee carrying the state in each of the last seven presidential elections. And all indications point to it doing so again this year.

A *Berkeley IGS Poll* analysis of the state’s current electorate by age also reveals that the transformation of the state’s electorate is likely to continue as generational replacement takes hold. This is due to the fact that the large majority of the state’s voters age 18-29 are Latino and Asian American, and they will be replacing a subset of voters who are predominantly white.

IGS co-Director Eric Schickler commented, “California’s transformation captures what Democrats hope will be the future for other states, like Texas and Arizona, which also exhibit growing racial and ethnic diversity among its voters.”

A review of the state’s official voting statistics since 1990

A review of the state’s official voter statistics from the California Secretary of State released this week shows that there are now about 25 million adult citizens in California who are eligible to register and vote. Of these about 22 million, or nearly 88 percent, are currently on the voter rolls. Both of these represent all-time highs in terms of the number of Californians registered to vote and the share of citizen-eligible adults who have registered.

And, while the number of Californians participating in today’s presidential election will not be known for many weeks, all indications point to a record number of Californians participating in the election. For example, counts of early voters released on November 2 by Political Data, Inc. shows that about 11.2 million ballots had already been received by county registrars across the state one day prior to Election Day. This far exceeds the number of early votes cast prior to Election Day in any previous statewide election.

Table 1 below compares the growth in the state’s total population, its citizen-eligible adults, and its registered voters since 1990, as well as the number of voters who have participated in all general elections that have been held in the state since then.

Table 1
Estimates of California population, eligible to vote and registration totals, and
turnout and participation rates in statewide general elections since 1990
(figures in thousands)

Election year	Population		Registration		Voting		
	Total population (in 000's)	Citizen-eligible adults ¹	Total registered (in 000's)	Percent of citizen-eligibles	Total voters (in 000's)	Percent of total registered	Percent of citizen-eligibles
2020^P	39,783	25,091	22,047	87.9			
2018	38,810	25,200	19,696	78.2	12,713	64.6	50.4
2016 ^P	38,557	24,875	19,412	78.0	14,611	75.3	58.7
2014	38,340	24,288	17,804	73.3	7,514	42.4	30.9
2012 ^P	37,669	23,803	18,246	76.7	13,202	72.4	55.5
2010	37,254	23,552	17,286	73.7	10,300	59.6	43.7
2008 ^P	38,049	23,209	17,304	74.6	13,743	79.4	59.2
2006	37,172	22,652	15,837	69.9	8,899	56.2	39.3
2004 ^P	35,394	22,075	16,557	75.0	12,590	76.0	57.0
2002	35,301	21,466	15,303	71.3	7,739	50.6	36.1
2000 ^P	34,336	21,461	15,707	73.2	11,143	70.9	57.9
1998	33,252	20,806	14,969	71.9	8,618	57.6	41.4
1996 ^P	32,344	19,527	15,602	80.2	10,260	65.6	52.5
1994	32,000	18,496	14,724	77.7	8,901	60.5	47.0
1992 ^P	31,000	20,864	15,101	72.6	11,374	75.3	54.5
1990	29,800	19,245	13,478	70.0	7,899	58.6	41.0

¹ Population estimates from the California Department of Finance, all others from the Secretary of State.

^P Indicates Presidential election year, all others are gubernatorial election years.

Figures rounded.

Major shift in the party loyalties of California voters over the past 30 years

As mentioned, the state's Democrat and No Party Preference registrants have increased in number by 3.5 million and 4.1 million voters respectively over the past three decades, while the number of Republicans have shown virtually no increase at all.

This has resulted in a significant decline in the share of the state's voters who are Republicans, from 39% in 1990 to just 24% now. Over this same period the Democrats' share of the total has declined slightly from about 50% in 1990 to 46% at present, while No Party Preference registrants now comprise 24% of the total compared to just 9% in 1990. Another 6% are now registered with other minor parties, up from 2% in 1990.

Table 2
Changes in California voter registration by party over the past 30 years
(figures in millions)

	1990		2020	
	Total <i>(in millions)</i>	%	Total <i>(in millions)</i>	%
Total registered voters	<u>13.5</u>	<u>100%</u>	<u>22.0</u>	<u>100%</u>
Democrat	6.7	49.6%	10.2	46.1%
Republican	5.3	39.3%	5.3	24.2%
No Party Preference	1.2	9.0%	5.3	24.0%
Other parties	0.3	2.1%	1.2	5.7%

Sources: California Secretary of State, November 1990 and October 2020. Figures rounded.

Shift in party loyalties occurred as California was undergoing a major transformation in the racial and ethnic composition of its voters

Over this same period California witnessed a major transformation in the racial and ethnic composition of its electorate. In 1990 white voters accounted for an estimated 79% of the total, while Latinos were 10%, Black Californians 7% and Asian Americans 4%. Now, according to the latest estimates of the *Berkeley IGS Poll*, just 53% of the electorate are white, while the proportion of Latinos has grown to 27% and Asian American has expanded to 14%. Another 6% of the state's voters are Black.

These percentages project to a greater than four-fold increase in the number of Latino voters and a five-fold increase in the number of Asian American voters from 1990 to today. Over this same period the number of white and Black voters grew only marginally, with neither keeping pace with the growth in the overall electorate.

Table 3
Changes in the racial/ethnic composition of the California electorate
over the past 30 years (figures in millions)

	1990		2020	
	Total <i>(in millions)</i>	%	Total <i>(in millions)</i>	%
Total registered voters	<u>13.5</u>	<u>100%</u>	<u>22.0</u>	<u>100%</u>
White	10.6	79%	11.6	53%
Latino	1.3	10%	5.9	27%
Asian American	0.6	4%	3.0	14%
Black	0.9	7%	1.2	6%

Sources: 2020 figures are projections from the late October 2020 Berkeley IGS Poll, while 1990 figures are estimates from The Field Poll as reported in a report published February 4, 2006 by Field Research Corporation.

Notes: For each year, whites, Asian Americans, Blacks and other races (not shown) include only those who are non-Hispanic, while Latinos include voters of any race. In addition, voters who identify as mixed Black and white races are included in the Black voter totals of each year. Figures rounded.

The huge expansion in the state’s voters of color has worked to the detriment of the Republican Party

The rapid increases in the state’s Latino and Asian American voting populations over the past thirty years have worked to the detriment of the Republican Party, as far fewer voters of color have chosen to register as Republicans compared to its white voters. According to the latest *Berkeley IGS Poll*, while Republicans still account for nearly a third of the state’s white voters (31%), they comprise just 12% of the state’s Black voters, 14% of its Latino voters, and 20% of its Asian American voters.

And, while Democrats in California outnumber Republicans among whites by 10 percentage points, their advantage among voters of color is considerably larger.

Table 4
Estimates of California’s current party registration by race/ethnicity

	Total registered voters	White	Latino	Asian American	Black
	%	%	%	%	%
Democrat	46	41	56	46	59
Republican	24	31	14	20	12
No Party Preference	24	22	24	32	19
Other parties	6	6	6	2	10

Source: Estimates from the late October 2020 Berkeley IGS Poll, except for Blacks, which are the based on the average of its September and late October polls to improve their statistical stability. Percentages rounded.

The transformation of the state’s electorate is likely to continue

A look at the racial and ethnic composition of California voters by age reveals that the transformation of the electorate that the state has witnessed over the past thirty years is likely to continue into the foreseeable future due to generational replacement.

For example, the latest *Berkeley IGS Poll* finds that for the state’s oldest voter segment, those age 75 or older, its party loyalties are more closely aligned to those that were present in the overall electorate thirty years ago, with Democrats comprising 44%, Republicans 39% and No Party Preference registrants 12% of the total.

And because the post-war generation of the state’s voters will eventually be displaced by the next generation of California voters, who are far less likely to be registered as Republicans and far more likely to be Democrats or No Party Preference registrants, California is likely to witness further declines in the share of its Republican Party registrants.

Table 5
The current age distribution of the California electorate by party registration

	Total registered voters %	18-29 %	30-39 %	40-49 %	50-64 %	65-74 %	75 or older %
Democrat	46	47	47	45	45	50	44
Republican	24	14	17	22	30	29	39
No Party Preference	24	31	29	27	21	18	12
Other parties	6	8	7	6	4	3	5

Source: Late October 2020 Berkeley IGS Poll. Percentages rounded.

At the same time voters of color are destined to comprise even larger shares of the state's overall electorate in the future than they do now. A look at the age distribution of the state's voters by race and ethnicity found in the latest *Berkeley IGS Poll* shows that the large majority of the state's voters age 18-29 are Latino and Asian American and they will be replacing an older subset of voters age 75 or older who are predominantly white.

Table 6
The current age distribution of the California electorate by race/ethnicity

	Total registered voters %	18-29 %	30-39 %	40-49 %	50-64 %	65-74 %	75 or older %
White	53	34	46	48	56	68	79
Latino	27	36	33	26	25	18	14
Asian-Amer.	14	24	16	15	10	8	3
Black	6	4	5	9	7	4	4

Source: Late October 2020 Berkeley IGS Poll. Whites, Asian Americans, Blacks and other races (not shown) include only those who are non-Hispanic, while Latinos include voters of any race. Percentages rounded.

About the late October 2020 Berkeley IGS Poll

The findings referencing the late October *Berkeley IGS Poll* are based on a statewide survey completed online in English and Spanish October 16-21, 2020 among 6,686 California registered voters by the Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS) at the University of California, Berkeley. The unweighted sample sizes of the registered voter subgroups from the late October *Berkeley IGS Poll* referenced in this report are as follows: whites (4,051), Latinos (1,311), Asian Americans (724), Blacks (623*), age 18-29 (975), 30-39 (1,060), 40-49 (1,077), 50-64 (1,902), 65-74 (1,132) and 75 or older (539).

* includes the combined number of Black voters from the poll's September and late October 2020 surveys.

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 email invitations.

Samples of the state's registered voters with email addresses were provided to IGS by Political Data, Inc., a leading supplier of registered voter lists in California, derived from information contained on the state's official voter registration rolls. Prior to the distribution of emails, the overall sample was stratified by age and gender to obtain a proper balance of respondents across 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 overall sample of registered voters to population characteristics of the electorate.

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 overall sample of registered voters are subject to a sampling error of approximately +/-2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, while the sampling error associated with results from subgroups of this population would be larger.

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>.