

Statewide Survey: Election Reform Proposals

*A project of the
New America Foundation and
the Survey and Policy Research Institute*

November 2006

By Philip J. Trounstine
Director, Survey and Policy Research Institute



Summary

In line with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's call for more competitive elections, a new independent study has found that California voters overwhelmingly support the idea of forming a citizens' commission to study ways that the state's election system might be reformed to encourage more independence and competition.

Even before such a commission is formed, a majority of voters statewide already supports the idea of instant runoff voting and half of all voters support moving to a system of proportional voting.

Support for these proposals is even stronger if voters are persuaded they would reduce negative campaigning, widen voters' choices and save public funds – outcomes that have proved themselves where these reform proposals have been introduced.

Three-fourths of voters believe California's system of electing state officials is unfair to independent and minor-party candidates; seven in 10 voters say they often feel they must choose the lesser of two evils; more than half the voters say California needs another major political party, and majorities say it's important to elect more independent and moderate candidates.

These are some of the findings of a new statewide survey commissioned by the New America Foundation, a nonprofit, post-partisan, public policy institute. The survey of 600 active voters – registered voters who have cast ballots in recent elections – was conducted Nov. 27-30, in English and Spanish, by the Survey and Policy Research Institute at San Jose State University. The margin of error of the survey is plus-or-minus 4 percentage points.

About half the voters – 49.4% -- say they are dissatisfied with the amount of attention the state legislature and governor spend on the issues most important to them, compared to 40% who say they are satisfied. Apparently, the governor gets more credit for tending to those issues, as his approval rating is 61-31% compared to 43-37% for the legislature.

Rural voters (71.9%), liberals (62.8%), union households (62.1%), blacks (58.3%), Latinos (57%) and Democrats (54.3%) are among the most dissatisfied with the attention paid to their issues by the legislature and governor.

And among those who are dissatisfied, 72.6% say the election system needs improvement, 69.7% say California ought to convene a voters' study group to consider election reforms, 61.5% say a new major party is needed and 63.2% say it's important to elect more independents.

About half the voters – 46.7% -- say state government would do a better job if elections were more competitive ; 58.3% say government would do a better job if a wider variety of candidates had a chance of winning elections, and 61.5% say California's system of electing state officials needs to be improved.

About seven in 10 voters – 69.5% -- say they often feel like they must choose between the lesser of two evils. That view is particularly strong among independents (79.4%), union households (78.2%), liberals (75.6%) and voters in the Bay Area (75.4%).

Fewer than two in 10 voters believe the current system of elections is fair to independent and minor-party candidates compared to 75.3% -- including 78.1% of Democrats and 70.2% of Republicans -- who say the system favors Democrats and Republicans.

Among those who say the system is unfair, 28.1% (most of them Democrats and Republicans) say that's okay with them. But about two thirds (66.4%) of those who say the system is unfair also say its unfairness is not okay with them.

Republicans (37.7%) and conservatives (41.3%) are more willing to accept the current system than are Democrats (27.1%) and liberals (19.7%).

About half the voters (51.3%) say California needs another major party, but 61.5% of liberals and 62.1% of voters in union households (about half of them Democrats) agree that another major party is needed

Citizens' Assembly¹

The notion of forming a citizens study group, as Canada has done, to propose reforms to the system of elections is overwhelmingly popular among California voters, with 72.8% in favor of the idea and just 18.5% opposed to the idea.

The questions was asked as follows:

Recently, Canada randomly selected 160 average voters to participate in a year-long study of their election process. The meetings were public and held at convenient times and the participants were paid. At the conclusion, their recommendations to improve the election process were put on the ballot for all voters to consider. Do you think it would be a good idea for California to convene a voters' study group like they did in Canada?

Responses were overwhelmingly positive across the state in all demographic groups.

	Good idea	Not good	DK	Ref
Bay Area	71	18	11	
Los Angeles	74	18	6	1
Other SoCA	74	16	9	
Central Valley	73	18	8	
Central Coast	73	20	4	4
Rural CA	66	28	6	
Democrat	77	14	9	0
Republican	65	27	7	1
Independent	80	13	6	
Liberal	82	11	7	
Moderate	73	19	8	
Conservative	65	25	8	2
White	72	20	8	1
Hispanic	85	9	6	
Asian	69	20	9	2
Black	69	19	11	
Union HH	82	13	5	

¹ The term "Citizens Assembly" was not used in an effort to prevent confusion among respondents. For the same reason, the survey referred to Canada and not British Columbia, where the process was instituted. Instead the concept was described by its function, allowing respondents to understand the process without the jargon.

Non-union HH	70	20	9	1
TOTAL	73	19	8	1

About two-thirds of voters (64.7%) said they believe average voters who participated in such a study could make intelligent decisions about how elections should be organized.

Seven in 10 voters said they would be more likely to support a recommendation to change the election system if it came from average voters compared to 10.2% who said they would be more likely to support a proposal from government and political leaders.

About half the voters (48%) would be more likely to support a recommendation that came from a group of average voters compared to about a third of voters (33.8%) who would be more likely to support a proposal from a panel of independent experts.

And more than half the voters said they would want to participate in a voters' study of the election system if they were paid and meetings were convenient.

Three-fourths of the voters said they would like to see the legislature and governor place such a study group on the ballot for statewide voter approval and two-thirds said they would vote for an initiative to put such a measure on the ballot so that it could be considered by all the voters.

Instant Runoff Voting

A majority of voters (51.8%) said they like the idea of instant runoff voting and another 6.8% said they think it might be a good idea. Only 34.3% reacted negatively to the concept, described in the following question:

Some California cities are now using a system called instant runoff voting. Under this system, you rank your first and second choice candidates for each office.² If your first-choice candidate doesn't make the cut, your vote goes to your second-choice candidate. The idea is to make sure your vote counts even if your first choice can't win. Does this sound like a good idea to you?

	Good idea	Not good	Maybe	DK	Ref
Bay Area	57	30	7	5	1
Los Angeles	52	33	11	4	1
Other SoCA	49	36	6	8	1
Central Valley	52	34	5	7	2
Central Coast	50	45		5	
Rural CA	47	31	13	9	
Democrat	58	28	8	6	0
Republican	42	44	7	5	2
Independent	58	29	3	9	1
Liberal	59	24	9	8	1
Moderate	52	39	5	3	1
Conservative	45	41	6	7	2
White	48	36	8	6	2
Hispanic	65	26	6	3	
Asian	58	38	2	2	
Black	64	31	3	3	

² Although most systems allow voters to rank their first, second and third choices, the concept was simplified in order to make it more easily understandable to respondents.

Union HH	56	29	11	4	
Non-union HH	50	36	6	7	1
TOTAL	52	34	7	6	1

The concept is most popular in the Bay Area, which makes sense since a form of instant runoff voting is already being used in San Francisco. It also was most popular among Democrats, liberals and Hispanics, although there appears to be no inherent reason why any of these groups would benefit more than Republicans and conservatives who were least supportive of the idea.

To understand what characteristics of instant runoff voting might be most appealing to voters, two further questions were asked, each providing a separate rationale for instant runoff voting.

One goal of instant runoff voting is to discourage negative, attack campaigns because every candidate wants to be the second choice of their opponents' supporters. If you thought instant runoff voting would discourage negative attacks, would that make you more or less likely to support the idea?

About six in 10 voters (58.7%) said they would be more likely to support instant runoff voting if they thought it would reduce negative, attack campaigns.

Among those who thought instant runoff voting was a good idea, about seven in 10 (72.3%) said they would be more likely to support it if it reduced negative campaigns. But among those who did not think it was a good idea to begin with, just 35.4% said they would be more likely to support it versus 37.4% who said they would be *less* likely to support the proposal.

Respondents were also asked:

Another goal of instant runoff voting is to save millions of taxpayer dollars by eliminating the need for a primary election since officeholders can be elected with a majority of the vote in a single November election. If you thought instant runoff voting would save public funds, would that make you more or less likely to support the idea?

Seven in 10 voters (69.8%) said they would be more likely to support the concept if they thought it would save millions of taxpayer dollars – suggesting this is a powerful argument in favor of the proposal.

Among those who said instant runoff voting was a good idea, 83% would be more likely to support the idea if they thought it would save money. And among those who said it was not a good idea, half (50.5%) said they would be more likely to support the idea if they thought it would save money.

Proportional Voting

Half of the voters (50%) said they support the idea of proportional voting and about a quarter oppose the idea (23.8%) but about as many voters were uncertain (23.7%), suggesting that the concept is not easy to grasp, even in a simplified form.

The following question was asked:

Another voting method is called proportional voting. There are many varieties of proportional voting used in the United States and around the world. The goal of proportional voting is to give significant groups of like-minded voters a voice in Sacramento that reflects their voting strength. This would also make it more likely for independent and minor-party candidates to win seats in the state legislature. Would you generally favor or oppose that kind of election system?

Not surprisingly, given the information read to respondents in the question, independents were far more likely to support the proposal – 63.9% -- than were other respondents. Those who support instant runoff voting were also more likely to support proportional voting (61.1%) as were those who believe California needs another major party (60.4%).

	Favor	Oppose	DK	Ref
Bay Area	54	21	24	1
Los Angeles	46	30	20	4
Other SoCA	50	27	21	2
Central Valley	50	16	32	2
Central Coast	48	18	29	5
Rural CA	53	25	22	
Democrat	52	19	26	3
Republican	41	35	21	2
Independent	64	13	22	1
Liberal	55	19	25	1
Moderate	55	21	21	3
Conservative	40	34	25	2
White	50	22	25	3
Hispanic	55	22	20	3
Asian	56	29	13	2
Black	44	28	28	
Union HH	57	23	19	1
Non-union HH	49	24	24	3
TOTAL	50	24	24	3

Conservatives, Republicans and blacks appear to be the most suspicious of proportional voting, while (after independents) Hispanics, Asians, union households and liberals appear the most receptive to the idea.

Hoping to further understand voters' thoughts on proportional voting, another question explained an additional rationale. Respondents were asked:

One goal of proportional voting is to introduce more points of view by creating districts that elect more than one legislator. Instead of electing one representative from a smaller district, voters elect several representatives from a larger district. Would you generally support or oppose that idea?

Not quite half (47.2%) of the voters generally supported proportional voting based on this rationale, while about a third (33.7%) were generally opposed.

As expected, independents were the most supportive (60.8%) and there were significant differences by race, with blacks (58.3%), Asians (57.8%) and Latinos (54.8%) all more supportive of the idea than whites (43.4%).

Although the history of reapportionment in California would suggest that smaller districts, crafted to give added influence to concentrations of minorities, might be favored by minority voters, it appears, at least from this measure, that these groups perceive they would do better with a proportional system in larger districts.

Methodology

The Survey and Policy Research Institute interviewed a random sample of 600 registered California voters who had cast ballots in at least one of the last four elections or who were newly registered to vote. These voters are referred to as active voters. Telephone interviews were conducted Nov. 27-30 in English and Spanish by EMH Opinions of Sacramento. The statistical margin of error for the survey, at the 95% confidence level, is plus or minus 4 percentage points. The survey also included a subset of 376 likely voters – those who had voted in at least two of the last four elections. The margin of error for these voters is plus or minus 5 percentage points.