

THE FIELD POLL

THE INDEPENDENT AND NON-PARTISAN SURVEY
OF PUBLIC OPINION ESTABLISHED IN 1947 AS
THE CALIFORNIA POLL BY MERVIN FIELD

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DAVIS AND SIMON SUPPORTERS DIFFER MARKEDLY ON THE ISSUES OF ABORTION AND GUN CONTROL.

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By Mark DiCamillo and Mervin Field

While there is constant public and media discussion about abortion, gun control and capital punishment, rarely do voters rank these issues as being of greatest importance to them in deciding whom they will support in an election.

However, politicians have long recognized that these very sensitive emotional issues can have a big impact in attracting or repelling voters in political campaigns.

In its most recent statewide survey, *The Field Poll* updated its public opinion trend measurements on abortion, gun control and capital punishment and their relationship to voter preferences for the two major party candidates in this year's gubernatorial race – incumbent Democratic Governor Gray Davis and Republican businessman Bill Simon.

In the survey completed in late April overall candidate preferences for Governor divided 43% for Davis, 29% for Simon and 28% undecided or preferring another candidate.

Summary of the findings

On the matter of abortion, the survey shows that a majority of California voters can be classified as pro-choice on abortion and supporting greater controls on gun ownership. Yet, there are sharp differences in regard to where supporters of each major party's gubernatorial candidate stand on these issues. At present the views of Davis supporters are closer to majority public opinion than are Simon supporters. In addition, the views of voters who are currently undecided in their preference for Governor are closer to the positions taken by Davis' supporters than Simon voters.

Voters are very one sided in their backing of capital punishment. While majorities of voters supporting Davis and Simon favor the death penalty, Simon supporters appear closer to the majority view of all voters on this issue. Opinions about capital punishment among those who are currently undecided in the Governor's race are about equidistant between the views held by the supporters of the two candidates.

Abortion

For many years a roughly two-thirds majority of California voters has approved of allowing an abortion if a woman desires it during the first trimester of a pregnancy. However, abortion has been opposed by two to one majorities when it is performed during the second trimester of a woman's pregnancy. And, when asked about abortion during the third trimester only a very small proportion of the public approves.

In viewing the trend of public opinion during the past thirteen years there has been virtually no change in how California voters feel about this issue.

Table 1
Voter opinion of allowing abortion if a woman desires it
(among registered voters)

	<u>Approve</u>	<u>Disapprove</u>	<u>No opinion</u>
<u>During first trimester</u>			
2002	63%	28	9
1998	61%	33	6
1997	62%	29	9
1996	63%	26	11
1989	66%	26	8
<u>During second trimester</u>			
2002	27%	55	18
1998	27%	58	15
1997	26%	56	18
1996	26%	54	20
1989	32%	55	13
<u>During third trimester</u>			
2002	16%	62	22
1998	12%	71	17
1997	14%	64	22
1996	13%	63	24
1989	15%	68	17

Mother's health in danger

While heavily disapproving of third trimester abortions, there is strong support (70% in the current survey) for allowing an abortion during the late stages of pregnancy if the health of the mother is in danger.

Table 2
**Approve/disapprove of abortion during late stages of pregnancy
if health of mother in danger
(among registered voters)**

	<u>Approve</u>	<u>Disapprove</u>	<u>No opinion</u>
2002	70%	19	11
1998	78%	16	6
1997	78%	16	6

Parental consent

In this and in recent previous surveys, greater than 60% of this state's voters approve of a law requiring teenagers under 18 to obtain the consent of her parents or legal guardian before allowing an abortion.

Table 3
**Favor or oppose law requiring a teenager under 18 to get consent
from parents or legal guardian before allowing an abortion
(among registered voters)**

	<u>Approve</u>	<u>Disapprove</u>	<u>No opinion</u>
2002	62%	29	9
1998	68%	27	5
1997	64%	31	5

Medi-Cal abortion payments

Another relatively stable trend on the abortion issue is whether the state of California should continue to make Medi-Cal abortion payments to women who can't afford them. In recent years the proportion saying that the state should pay has ranged from 53% to 59%, with the current survey finding a 59% to 34% majority supporting this policy.

Table 4
**Should California continue to make Medi-Cal abortion payments
for women who can't afford it
(among registered voters)**

	<u>State should pay</u>	<u>State should not pay</u>	<u>No opinion</u>
2002	59%	34	7
1998	54%	39	7
1997	53%	40	7
1996	53%	41	4
1995	56%	40	4
1991	57%	38	5
1989	56%	39	5

Change abortion laws?

When it comes to the issue of whether laws should be changed to make it easier or harder to obtain an abortion, the largest proportion of California voters (41% in this survey) takes the middle ground, preferring no change in existing abortion laws. Those who would like to see changes made divide almost evenly – 27% in favor of laws making it easier to obtain an abortion and 23% saying make it harder to get an abortion. This division of sentiment has been very stable over the years.

Table 5
Should laws be changed to make abortion easier to obtain, harder to obtain or should no changes be made to existing laws? (among registered voters)

	<u>Make easier to obtain</u>	<u>Make no change</u>	<u>Make harder to obtain</u>	<u>No opinion</u>
2002	27%	41	23	9
2000	28%	43	23	6
1998	20%	46	29	5
1997	24%	42	26	8
1996	21%	45	27	7
1995	33%	38	26	3
1993	32%	39	23	6
1992	34%	39	23	4
1991	33%	39	22	6

Effectiveness of strong gun control laws

California voters are evenly divided in regard to perceptions about the effectiveness of stronger laws restricting sale and possession guns in reducing the amount of violent crime. On this issue 50% of voters believe stronger gun control laws are very or somewhat effective in reducing violent crime, while 48% think they are not too or not at all effective. This year’s findings are similar to previous measurements on the subject.

Table 6
How effective are stronger laws restricting sale and possession of guns in reducing the amount of violent crime (among registered voters)

	<u>Very/somewhat effective</u>	<u>Not too/not at all effective</u>	<u>No opinion</u>
April 2002	50%	48	2
June 2000	53%	45	2
August 1999	55%	44	1
January 1994	50%	45	5

Gun owners rights vs. more gun controls

One long-standing issue argued in respect to gun control laws is what should be a higher priority – protecting the right of Americans to own guns or imposing greater control on gun ownership. Today’s survey as well as other recent polling data reveal that by about three to two margins voters attach more importance to imposing greater control on gun ownership than on protecting the right to own guns.

Table 7

Which is more important – protecting the right of Americans to own guns, or to imposing greater controls on gun ownership (among registered voters)

	<u>Greater controls on gun ownership</u>	<u>Protecting the right to own guns</u>	<u>No opinion</u>
April 2002	55%	39	6
June 2000	56%	37	7
August 1999	57%	35	8

Capital punishment

Over the past fifty years, capital punishment is an issue that periodically gets intense media and public attention – usually at a time surrounding an execution. However, the issue often loses some of its salience during other periods. *The Field Poll* began measuring California public opinion on the death penalty in 1956. Between 1956 and 1971 public support for the death penalty ranged from 49% to 58%, with opposition ranging from 29% to 34%.

Beginning in the 1970s public opinion swung heavily in favor of the death penalty, and in the mid 1980s and the early part of the 1990s support for capital punishment exceeded 80%. There was a slight ebbing in public backing of the death penalty in the late 1990s and in 2000. In the current survey, 72% of voters now favor the death penalty, while 25% are opposed.

Table 8
Trend of public opinion toward the death penalty
(among registered voters)

	<u>Favor</u>	<u>Oppose</u>	<u>No opinion</u>
2002	72%	25	3
2000	66%	30	4
1997	76%	20	4
1992	82%	13	5
1989	82%	14	4
1986	83%	14	3
1985	83%	15	2
1981	78%	17	5
1979	75%	20	5
1977	71%	23	6
1971	58%	34	8
1966	54%	30	16
1965	51%	39	10
1963	56%	28	16
1960	55%	35	10
1956	49%	29	22

Measures prior to 1992 are based on all California adults

Comparing Davis vs. Simon voters on abortion

There are sharp differences in where the supporters of each major party’s gubernatorial candidate stand on some aspects of the abortion issue. Regarding a woman’s right to have an abortion during the first trimester, 82% of Davis’ supporters approve, while among Simon supporters, only half as many (41%) feel this way.

Supporters of the two candidates are closer in their opinions of the issue of a late term abortion if the mother’s health is in danger---76% of Davis supporters and 61% of Simon’s approve of this.

However, on the matter of continuing state Medi-Cal abortion payments to women who can’t afford them, big differences exist between the two candidates’ backers. Three-fourths (75%) of those preferring Davis feel that the state should continue this policy. On the other hand, just 41% of Simon voters feel this way, while a majority (53%) think that the state should not pay for such abortions.

On the matter of a law requiring a teenager under 18 to obtain consent from her parents or legal guardians, 74% of those backing Simon are in favor. By contrast, just 48% of Davis’ voters favor the concept of parental consent.

On the overall measure of what should be done about abortion laws in general there is wide disagreement between the two candidates’ supporters. While sizeable numbers of supporters for each candidate would favor making no change to existing abortion laws, there are big differences among those who would like to see abortion law changes. Davis supporters, by a 37% to 11% margin, favor changing laws to make abortion easier to obtain. However, the reverse is true among voters supporting Simon, with 40% in favor of changing laws to make abortion more difficult to obtain and just 13% supporting changing laws to make abortion easier to obtain.

Undecided voters generally closer to Davis supporters' views on abortion

Among voters who are currently undecided in their gubernatorial preference, abortion attitudes appear to be closer to those held by Davis supporters in each area, except on the issue of parental consent, where they more closely mirror the views of Simon voters.

Table 9
Comparison of the stands taken by Davis and Simon supporters on abortion
(among registered voters)

	All voters	Davis voters	Simon voters	Other/ undec. voters
<u>Allow abortion during first trimester</u>				
Approve	63%	82%	41%	60%
Disapprove	28	14	46	28
No opinion	9	4	13	12
<u>Late term abortion if mother's health in danger</u>				
Approve	70%	76%	61%	70%
Disapprove	19	15	27	18
No opinion	11	9	12	12
<u>Continue mother's Medi-Cal abortion payment</u>				
State should pay	59%	75%	41%	56%
Should not pay	34	24	53	30
No opinion	7	1	6	14
<u>Favor or oppose parental consent</u>				
Favor	62%	48%	74%	68%
Oppose	29	44	16	23
No opinion	9	8	10	9
<u>Abortion laws</u>				
Make easier	27%	37%	13%	28%
No change	41	47	37	39
Make harder	23	11	40	23
No opinion	9	5	10	10

Davis vs. Simon voters on gun control

There are big differences between Davis and Simon supporters on the issue of gun control. Three fourths (73%) of Davis supporters believe it is more important to impose greater controls on gun ownership than it is to protect the right of Americans to own guns. By contrast, only one-third of Simon voters take this position, while 60% attach greater importance to protecting gun owner rights. Two-thirds (68%) of Davis voters also believe that gun control laws are very or somewhat effective in reducing violent crime, compared to just 30% of Simon voters who feel this way.

Undecided voters closer to Davis's supporters' views on gun control

Those voters who express no preference for either Davis or Simon appear to have views closer to those of Davis supporters on the matter of gun control.

Table 10
Comparison of the stands taken by Davis and Simon supporters on gun control
(among registered voters)

	<u>Total voters</u>	<u>Davis voters</u>	<u>Simon voters</u>	<u>Other/ undec. Voters</u>
Which is more important:				
<u>Gun owner rights vs. gun control laws</u>				
Gun control laws	55%	73%	33%	53%
Gun owner rights	39	23	60	38
No opinion	6	4	7	9
Effectiveness of gun control laws				
<u>in reducing crime</u>				
Very/somewhat effective	50%	68%	30%	46%
Not too/not at all effective	48	29	67	54
No opinion	2	3	3	*

* Less than 1/2 of 1%.

Comparing Davis vs. Simon voters on the death penalty

Simon's supporters are overwhelmingly (92%) in favor of the death penalty. While a majority (57%) of Davis voters also favors keeping the death penalty, a fairly large minority (40%) are ready to do away with it.

Undecided voters closer to Simon supporters' views on the death penalty

Those who are undecided in the gubernatorial preference favor keeping the death penalty by a 73% to 23% margin. Their views place them about mid-way between the beliefs of Davis supporters and those favoring Simon.

Table 11
Comparison of the stands taken by Davis and Simon supporters
on the death penalty
(among registered voters)

	<u>Total voters</u>	<u>Davis voters</u>	<u>Simon voters</u>	<u>Other/ undec. Voters</u>
<u>Death penalty</u>				
Keep	72%	57%	92%	73%
Do away with	25	40	7	23
No opinion	3	3	1	4

Information About the Survey

Sample Details

The results in this report are based on a statewide survey conducted April 19-25, 2002 by telephone in English and Spanish using a random digit dial sampling methodology. The results of the overall preference measure for Governor is based on a representative sample of 705 registered voters in California, while the results of questions about abortion, gun control and the death penalty were asked of a random subsample of 343 registered voters.

According to statistical theory, 95% of the time results from the overall registered voter sample would have a sampling error of +/- 3.8 percentage points, while findings from the abortion, gun control and death penalty questions have a sampling error of +/- 5.6 percentage points. The sampling error estimates of subgroups would be larger. There are many possible sources of error in any survey other than sampling variability. Different results could occur because of differences in question wording, sequencing or through undetected errors or omissions in sampling, interviewing or data processing. Extensive efforts were made to minimize such errors.

Questions Asked

Do you approve or disapprove of allowing abortion during the first three months of pregnancy?

IF APPROVE: Would you approve or disapprove of allowing abortion if the mother was between the fourth and six month of her pregnancy? IF APPROVE: would you approve or disapprove of allowing abortion if the mother was more than six months into her pregnancy?

Would you approve or disapprove of allowing abortion in the later stages of a pregnancy if the health of the mother were in danger?

In respect to the issue of abortion, do you favor laws that would make it more difficult for a woman to get an abortion, favor laws that would make it easier to get an abortion, or should no change be made to existing abortion laws?

Do you favor or oppose changing state laws relating to abortion to require that a teenager under age 18 inform her parents or legal guardian before allowing abortion?

Currently, the state of California under Medi-Cal pays the costs for an abortion by a woman who can't afford to pay for it herself. Do you think the state should continue to pay for such abortions or not?

As you know, this state has capital punishment – that is, execution – as a form of punishment for certain crimes. How do you personally feel about capital punishment? Would you be in favor of doing away with the death sentence, or do you feel that the death sentence should be kept as a punishment for serious crimes?

How effective do you think stronger laws restricting the sale and possession of guns would be in reducing the amount of violent crime in your community – very effective, somewhat effective, not too effective or not at all effective?

What do you think is more important – to protect the right of Americans to own guns, or to impose greater controls on gun ownership?