

# 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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**NO IMPROVEMENT IN THE NEGATIVE  
JOB RATINGS OF THE STATE  
LEGISLATURE. VOTERS STILL  
STRONGLY SUPPORT TERM LIMITS.**

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by Mark DiCamillo and Mervin Field

Pluralities of California voters continue to view the job that the state legislature is doing in a negative light. Currently, 46% disapprove of the performance of the legislature, while just 33% approve and 21% have no opinion.

The lowest job performance rating given to the state legislature in recent years was in July 2003 when 67% of voters disapproved and 19% approved. The most favorable rating offered in recent years was in January 2001, when approval stood at 51% and disapproval 29%.

These are the findings from the latest *Field Poll* about the legislature, conducted among a random sample of California voters in late September.

The results show that more Democrats, Republicans and non-partisan voters rate the legislature negatively than positively, although Republicans are the most critical.

The current findings are shown along with previous *Field Poll* measures conducted since 1983 in the following table.

**Table 1**  
**Trend of voter appraisals of the job the state legislature is doing**  
**(among registered voters)**

	<u>Approve</u>	<u>Disapprove</u>	<u>No opinion</u>
September 2004	33%	46	21
August 2004	33%	49	18
May 2004	27%	52	21
February 2004	26%	58	16
January 2004	23%	62	15
July 2003	19%	67	14
April 2003	31%	51	18
September 2002	35%	46	19
July 2002	45%	36	9
April 2002	39%	41	20
January 2002	40%	36	24
December 2001	44%	33	23
September 2001	41%	39	20
May 2001	35%	48	17
January 2001	51%	29	20
June 2000	47%	27	26
February 2000	49%	22	29
October 1999	46%	29	25
August 1999	43%	27	30
March 1999	47%	28	25
August 1998	45%	33	22
August 1997	37%	46	17
February 1997	39%	34	27
September 1996	43%	45	12
June 1996	38%	53	9
February 1995	34%	59	7
May 1993	28%	64	8
September 1992	28%	67	5
July 1992	26%	68	6
January 1992	41%	57	3
August 1990	45%	48	7
February 1988	57%	36	7
June 1983	43%	49	8
<u>Party (September 2004)</u>			
Democrats	34%	43	24
Republicans	29%	52	19
Non-partisan/other	39%	43	18

*Note: Measures prior to 1997 conducted among all adults using a three- or five-point response scale, which was converted to the current two-point approve/disapprove scale for comparative purposes.*

### **Opinion about term limits**

In 1990 California voters passed Proposition 140, limiting the number of terms that state legislators can serve. The law limits members of the Assembly to no more than three two-year terms and limits State Senators to two four-year terms.

In this survey voters were asked how they felt about term limits for state officeholders. By an overwhelming 75% to 20% margin, voters continue to view term limits as a good thing rather than a bad thing for the state. Voters of all political persuasion hold quite strongly to this belief.

	<b><u>Total</u></b>	<b><u>Democrats</u></b>	<b><u>Republicans</u></b>	<b><u>Non-partisans/ others</u></b>
Good thing	75%	66%	85%	77%
Bad thing	20	30	11	15
No opinion	5	4	4	8

### **Has the legislature's performance improved since term limits?**

More than four in ten registered voters (43%) think that limiting the terms of state legislators has had no effect on the overall job performance of the legislature. Of the rest, 24% believe that there has been an improvement, while 15% think term limits have led to a decline in their overall performance.

Within the partisan groups, pluralities hold to the view that term limits have had no effect on the performance of the legislature: Republicans (45%), Democrats (40%) and non-partisan/others (47%).

However, among those who perceive a change, Democrats are more likely to think that term limits have led to a worsening of the legislature's performance (24%) than see an improvement (17%). The situation is different with Republicans – 32% think term limits have improved the performance of the legislature, while just 7% believe things have gotten worse.

By a two to one margin (24% to 12%), non-partisans think the legislature's performance has improved as a result of term limits.

**Table 3**  
**Has limiting the terms of state legislators improved their performance,  
 made things worse or had no effect?**  
**(among registered voters)**

	<u><b>Total</b></u>	<u><b>Democrats</b></u>	<u><b>Republicans</b></u>	<u><b>Non- partisans/ others</b></u>
Improved	24%	17%	32%	24%
No effect	43	40	45	47
Made things worse	15	24	7	12
No opinion	18	19	16	17

**A review of recent history involving term limits in California**

After the enacting of legislative term limits for state officeholders in 1990, the issue of extending term limits to members of Congress went before the voters in 1992 in the form of an initiative (Proposition 164). It was approved overwhelmingly but the initiative never took effect, when the courts ruled that federal law superceded state law on matters relating to Congressional elections.

In March 2002 another statewide initiative was put to a vote that would have allowed incumbent legislators who have reached their term limit to run for up to four additional years, if they obtained signatures from at least 20% of voters who voted for that office in the last general election. That initiative, however, was defeated at the polls by a 58% to 42% margin.

## **Information About the Survey**

### **Sample Details**

The findings in this report are based on interviews conducted among a random sample of 600 registered voters in California. Interviews were conducted by telephone in English and Spanish September 24-29, 2004. Sampling was carried out using random digit dial methodology which gives all voters, including those whose phone number is listed and unlisted, an equal chance of being contacted. Up to four attempts were made to reach a randomly selected voter at each number dialed. After the completion of interviewing the larger registered voter sample was weighted to Field Poll estimates of the state's total registered voter population.

According to statistical theory, the overall results for each proposition have a sampling error of +/- 4.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. These are other possible sources of error in any survey in addition to sampling variability. Different results could occur because of differences in question wording, sequencing or through omissions or errors in sampling, interviewing or data processing. Extensive efforts were made to minimize such potential errors.

### **Questions Asked**

Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the way the California state legislature is doing its job?

As you know, California has a term limit law for all state and local elected officials. That means a person can serve in the state Assembly for only three terms, a total of six years. A person in the State Senate can serve only two terms, a total of eight years. Overall, do you think California's term limits law is a good thing or a bad thing for the state?

Do you think limiting the terms of state legislators has improved the way the state legislature has performed, made things worse or had no effect?