

# 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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## **PROPORTION OF VOTERS CASTING MAIL BALLOTS WILL REACH A NEW HIGH IN TODAY'S ELECTION.**

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by Mark DiCamillo and Mervin Field

In today's statewide election, *The Field Poll* estimates that approximately 6.8 million California voters will be deciding the fate of eight ballot propositions in which a reported \$250-\$300 million will have been spent in the campaigning of proponents and opponents of the measures. Of these, an estimated 2.75 million will be absentee or mail ballot votes, constituting 40.5% of all ballots cast, a record high proportion.

The latest *Field Poll* report documents the growth of absentee ballot voting in California since 1976 and examines the differences in the demographic characteristics of absentee voters and precinct voters in this election.

### **Summary of special election voting**

According to the California Department of Finance, there are 36.8 million residents of California, of whom 22.5 million are adults eligible to vote. Approximately 15.8 million, or 70.6%, are registered to vote.

Thus, a turnout of 6.8 million would represent a turnout of 42.9% based on registration and 30.2% based on total eligible adults.

The last statewide special election occurred in 2003 in which California voters recalled Democrat Gray Davis from office as Governor in a heated campaign and elected Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger. In that election 9.4 million or 61.2% of the registration voted.

While today's turnout is not likely to come close to that total, it would represent a higher turnout than the two most recent other special elections held in 1993 and 1979.

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

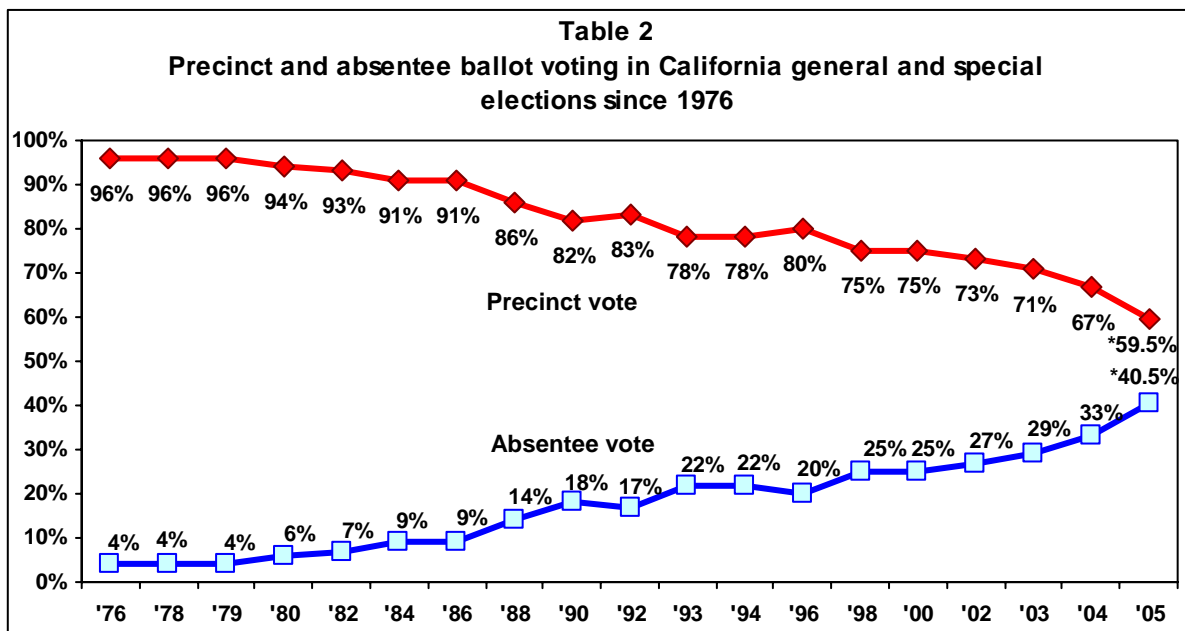
Statewide Special Elections	Population		Registration		Voting		
	Total	Eligible to Vote	Number Registered	Percent of Citizen-Eligibles	Number Voting	Percent of Registration	Percent of Citizen-Eligibles ("Participation rate")
2005	36,810	22,497	15,839	70.6	6,800*	42.9*	30.2*
2003	35,591	21,833	15,381	70.5	9,413	61.2	43.1
1993	31,961	19,050	14,525	76.2	5,282	36.4	24.7
1979	23,669	15,084	10,007	66.3	3,741	37.4	24.8
1973	20,915	13,327	9,090	68.2	4,329	47.6	32.4

\* Field Poll estimates.  
 All other figures are from the California Secretary of State, except for total population, which comes from the California Department of Finance.

**Record high proportion of votes to be cast by absentee ballot**

In its final round of pre-election polling, *The Field Poll* found that 40.5% of all likely voters said they intended to vote by means of an absentee ballot, while 59.5% were intending to cast their vote at their local voting precinct. If these estimates are born out, this would represent a record high proportion of absentee ballot voting in California, surpassing the previous record high set in the last presidential election when 32.6% of all ballots were cast via absentee ballot.

Table 2 shows that there has been a steady increase in absentee ballot voting in California over the past thirty years, rising from 4% in the late 1970's to the low 20% range in the mid-1990's to its current 40.5% level in 2005.



\* Field Poll estimates for 2005. All other figures are from the California Secretary of State.

### **Reasons for increase in absentee ballot voting**

Up until the late 1970's, absentee voting was limited to those with a declared physical handicap or who could show that they were going to be out of state on Election Day. These laws were changed in 1978 and after this change was made, absentee ballot voting became more appealing to many state voters for a wide variety of reasons. They include the following:

- Absentee voting provides voters a way to cope with the growing length and complexity of the state's election ballot. This is particularly true in this year's special election in which voters are being asked to make decisions on eight fairly complicated and highly contentious ballot propositions.
- It enables voters to avoid precinct-related inconveniences, such as bad weather, long lines and in some cases, the fear of going to an unfamiliar precinct polling place to cast their vote.
- It extends the "voting window" from a relatively short 13-hour period on Election Day to a 3-4 week period. This provides busy voters with greater opportunities to find the time to vote.
- Absentee ballot voting is now actively encouraged by the state's political parties, campaign organizations and special interest groups as a way to organize their supporters and encourage them to get their vote "in the bank" prior to Election Day.
- County Registrars have actively encouraged absentee ballot voting as a way to reduce Election Day expenses, since if more voters vote by mail and fewer vote at their voting precinct, the number of polling precincts that would need to be opened on Election Day could be reduced.
- Research has shown that the experience of absentee ballot voting is pleasant one and also fits in well with the state's political culture, which is becoming increasingly detached and laid back in terms of civic participation.

Another change to state voting laws was made in 2002 permitting voters to fill out a form to become permanently listing on the voting rolls as an absentee ballot voter. In just three years, the number of voters who have become "permanent absentee voters" exceeds 3.3 million, constituting 21% of all registered voters statewide, according to the Secretary of State.

Because of these factors, it is likely that absentee ballot voting will continue to grow in popularity, and constitute a larger and larger share of all ballots cast in California elections in the foreseeable future.

### **Precinct and absentee ballot voter characteristics compared**

When absentee ballot voting constituted only a small share of the votes cast in California elections, there were big differences in the characteristics between those who voted by mail and those who voted at the precincts. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, for example, larger proportions of absentee ballot voters were Republicans than Democrats and included many more white non-Hispanics and only a tiny proportion of ethnic voters.

Now, as absentee voting has become more commonplace these historical differences are narrowing, but have not been eliminated entirely.

*The Field Poll* estimates that among those voting absentee as many Democrats (41%) will be represented as Republicans (41%). By contrast, *The Field Poll* estimates that Democrats will likely have a 12 percentage-point advantage over Republicans in this election, with 46% of these voters being Democrats, 34% Republican and 20% non-partisan or registered with another party.

Among absentee voters 36% consider themselves conservative in politics, while just 31% of precinct voters describe themselves this way.

Another difference between absentee voters and precinct voters relates to race/ethnicity. Over three in four absentee voters report being white non-Hispanic (76%) compared to 68% among precinct voters.

One demographic characteristic that has long differentiated absentee and precinct voters over the years has to do with their age, and this will likely continue in this year's special election. Nearly a third of absentee ballot voters (31%) are age 65 or older, double the proportion of precinct voters in this age category (15%). Elderly voters have been found to be more frequent voters and the relative ease of voting by mail has reinforced this tendency.

**Table 3**  
**A comparison of the demographic characteristics of likely precinct and absentee ballot voters in the 2005 special election in California**

	<u>Total likely voters</u>	<u>Precinct voters</u>	<u>Absentee voters</u>
<u>Party registration</u>			
Democrat	43%	46%	41%
Republican	38	34	41
Non-partisan/Other	19	20	18
<u>Political ideology</u>			
Conservative	33%	31%	36%
Moderate	43	45	40
Liberal	24	24	24
<u>Gender</u>			
Male	48%	49%	46%
Female	52	51	54
<u>Race/ethnicity</u>			
White non-Hispanic	72%	68%	76%
Latino	15	16	12
Black/African-American	6	8	5
Asian/other	7	8	7
<u>Age</u>			
18-29	11%	12%	9%
30-39	16	19	12
40-49	19	23	14
50-64	32	31	34
65 or older	22	15	31
<u>Marital status</u>			
Married/living together	63%	62%	64%
Separated/divorced/widowed	22	20	25
Single/never married	15	18	11
<u>Religion</u>			
Protestant	40%	38%	42%
Catholic	24	24	24
Other	19	21	18
No preference	17	17	16
<u>Born-Again Christian</u>			
Yes	26%	26%	25%
No	74	74	75
<u>Household income</u>			
Less than \$20,000	11%	10%	12%
\$20,000 – \$39,999	16	16	17
\$40,000 – \$79,999	33	35	29
\$80,000 or more	40	39	42
<u>Union affiliation</u>			
Union household	26%	28%	23%
Non-union	74	72	77
<u>Education</u>			
High school or less	21%	20%	22%
Some college/trade school	30	30	30
College graduate	24	26	21
Post-graduate work	25	24	27

## **Information About The Survey**

### **Sample Details**

The findings in this report are based on a survey of 1,087 California likely voters in the November 8 special election conducted October 18-30, 2005. The survey was conducted by telephone in English and Spanish.

Households for both surveys were sampled using a random digit dial methodology, which randomly selects operating telephone exchanges within all area codes serving California households in proportion to population. Within each exchange, telephone numbers are created by adding random digits to each selected telephone exchange. This method permits access to all landline telephone numbers statewide, both listed and unlisted, and gives each residential phone listing an equal chance of being selected.

According to statistical theory, 95% of the time results from the overall sample have a sampling error of +/- 3 percentage points.

### **Questions Asked**

Governor Schwarzenegger has called a special statewide election for November 8 in which voters will be asked to decide on a number of statewide ballot propositions. Are you inclined to vote or not vote in next month's statewide election? (IF YES:) How certain are you that you will vote in that election – are you absolutely certain, fairly certain, not too certain, or have you already voted early or by mail using an absentee ballot?

(IF ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN TO VOTE:) If you do vote in the November 8 special election, will you vote early or by mail using an absentee ballot or will you vote at your precinct polling place on Election Day?