

# 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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### **THE CHANGING CALIFORNIA ELECTORATE (PART 1): LARGE-SCALE DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN CALIFORNIA'S ELECTORATE FROM WHAT IT WAS THIRTY YEARS AGO.**

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By Mark DiCamillo and Mervin Field

As California's population has grown by over 15 million from about 23 million to more than 38 million in the past thirty years, there have also been very large demographic changes among the state's registered voters.

In a two-part report, *The Field Poll* examines the changing shape of the California electorate, as well as changes in voter attitudes on a number of important social and political issues over the past three decades. Today's report presents the demographic shifts that have taken place since the late 1970's both in the overall electorate and within each of the parties. Tomorrow's story compares current voter attitudes to those held by California voters thirty years ago earlier on a range of social and political issues.

Among the most significant demographic changes that have taken place over the past three decades are these:

- As the percentage of white non-Hispanics in the overall population has dropped 26 points from 68.9% to 42.8% over the past three decades, white non-Hispanics' share of the state's registered voter population has decreased 18 points from 83.0% to 65.0%.
- These declines are offset by large increases in the proportion of Latinos and Asians. Latinos now comprise 37.0% of the state's total population (up 18.9% since 1978) and 21% of the state's registered voters (up 13 points). The percentages of blacks in both the overall population and among registered voters have declined only marginally, but there has been a big increase in the proportions of Asians/others. These voters now comprise 14.2% of the state's total population (up 8.7 points) and 8.2% of the state's registered voters (up 5.3 points).

- Changes in the racial/ethnic composition of the state's electorate are occurring at a faster rate among Democratic Party voters and those registered as non-partisan than among Republicans. Currently 55% of registered Democrats and 59% of non-partisans are white non-Hispanic, while greater than four in ten are voters of color. By contrast, among Republicans about eight in ten (79%) are white non-Hispanic and 21% include ethnic voters.
- Geographically, the share of voters residing in inland areas of the state has expanded, while there has been a decline in the proportion of registered voters living in the state's two largest metropolitan areas, Los Angeles County and the San Francisco Bay Area. This shift is more evident among the state's GOP than the Democratic Party. Just 33% of Republicans now live in Los Angeles County or the Bay Area, compared to 53% among Democrats.
- The California electorate is now older, better educated, includes more homeowners and a smaller proportion of Protestants than thirty years ago. The advancing age of voters and the growing number of homeowners is found across all parties. Larger proportions of Democrats and non-partisans are now college graduates than was true three decades ago. The decline in Protestant voters is seen across all parties but has been greatest within the Democratic Party.

These findings come from a compilation of the nine most recent statewide *Field Polls* conducted among a total of 9,257 registered voters through May 2009. Comparisons are made to the state's voter population in 1978, which were based on four statewide *Field Polls* conducted among 4,072 registered voters that year.

### **Big decline in proportions of white non-Hispanics in state's overall population and in voter registration totals**

According to California Department of Finance estimates, the state's total population now exceeds 38 million, a nearly 15.5 million-person increase since 1978. Over this same period the number of Californians who are registered to vote has increased from 10.1 million to 17.1 million, a 7 million-voter addition as reported by the California Secretary of State.

Among the overall population, white non-Hispanics now account for just 42.8% of the state's total population, down from 68.9% in 1978. Among registered voters The *Field Poll* estimates that 65% of the state's registered voters are now white non-Hispanic, an 18-percentage point decline from 1978.

The declining share of the state's white non-Hispanics has been offset by large increases in the proportion of Latinos and Asians. Among the overall population, Latinos' share has almost doubled from 18.9% to 37.0%. Blacks have declined to 6.0% (down 1.5 points) while the percentage of Asians/others has more than doubled to 14.2% (up 8.7 points).

The percentage of Latinos and Asians among state registered voters has also grown but by not as much as in the larger population. According to *Field Poll* estimates 21.0% of registered voters are now Latino, 5.8% black and another 8.2% are Asians or others. This represents a 13 percentage-point increase in the share of Latino voters, a marginal decline in the percentage of black registered voters and an increase of 5.3 points in the share of voters who are Asians/others.

**Table 1**  
**Changes in California Total Population and Registered Voter Population by Race/Ethnicity (2009 vs. 1978)**

	Total Population			Registered Voters		
	2009	1978	△	2009	1978	△
<b>Total (in 000's)</b>	<b>38,293</b>	<b>22,836</b>	<b>+15,457</b>	<b>17,153</b>	<b>10,130</b>	<b>+7,023</b>
<b>White non-Hispanic</b>	<b>42.8%</b>	<b>68.9%</b>	<b>-26.1</b>	<b>65.0%</b>	<b>83.0%</b>	<b>-18.0</b>
<b>Latino</b>	<b>37.0</b>	<b>18.1</b>	<b>+18.9</b>	<b>21.0</b>	<b>8.0</b>	<b>+13.0</b>
<b>Black/African-American</b>	<b>6.0</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>-1.5</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>6.1</b>	<b>-0.3</b>
<b>Asian/other</b>	<b>14.2</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>+8.7</b>	<b>8.2</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>+5.3</b>

Sources: Population totals and ethnic subgroup estimates from California Department of Finance. Registered voter totals from California Secretary of State, while ethnic subgroup percentages are Field Poll estimates.

### **Big changes in the partisan composition of California's registered voters**

There has been a marked shift in the partisan composition of the state's electorate. In 1978 over 90% of voters were registered either as a Democrat or Republican. Now, the combined share of the two major party voters has declined to about three in four (75.6%). Today, those registered as either non-partisan/decline to state or with other parties represent almost one in four voters (24.4%).

Since 1978 the Democratic Party's registration advantage over the GOP has declined. Then Democrats outnumbered Republicans by 22.4 percentage points, 56.6% to 34.2%. Now, the registration edge that Democrats have over the GOP is 13.6 percentage points. At present, 44.6% of all voters are registered Democrats and 31.0% are Republicans.

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Table 2  
**Changes in California's Party Registration (2009 vs. 1978)**

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	<u>2009</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>△</u>
<b>Total registered (in 000's)</b>	<b><u>17,153</u></b>	<b><u>10,130</u></b>	<b><u>+7,023</u></b>
<b>Democrat</b>	<b>44.6%</b>	<b>56.6%</b>	<b>-12.0</b>
<b>Republican</b>	<b>31.0</b>	<b>34.2</b>	<b>-3.2</b>
<b>Non-partisan/Decline to state</b>	<b>20.0</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>+12.2</b>
<b>Other parties</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>+3.0</b>

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*Source: California Secretary of State*

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### **Changes in the ethnic/racial composition of each party's voters**

The ethnic and racial profiles of members of the state's two major parties and its non-partisan voters have also undergone significant changes in the past three decades. These changes have been much more dramatic among Democrats and non-partisans than among GOPers .

For example, 55% of the state's registered Democrats are now white non-Hispanic, while 45% are voters of color. By comparison, in 1978 over three in four Democrats (76%) were white non-Hispanic and 24% were comprised of ethnic voters.

Similarly, 59% of non-partisans/others are now white non-Hispanic, while 41% are ethnic voters. Thirty years ago nearly nine in ten non-partisans/others (87%) were white non-Hispanic and just 13% were voters of color.

By contrast, there have been less dramatic changes in the racial and ethnic composition of the state's registered Republicans. At present 79% of the state's GOP are white non-Hispanic, while 21% are Latino, black or Asian/other. This differs from 1978 when 93% of Republicans were white non-Hispanic and 7% were ethnic voters.

**Table 3**  
**Changes in California's Party Registration**  
**by Race/Ethnicity (2009 vs. 1978)**

	<u>Democrats</u>		<u>Republicans</u>		<u>Non-partisan/other</u>	
	<u>2009</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>1978</u>
<b>Total (in 000's)</b>	<b>7,642</b>	<b>5,730</b>	<b>5,326</b>	<b>3,465</b>	<b>4,185</b>	<b>935</b>
<b>White non-Hispanic</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>93%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>87%</b>
<b>Latino</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Black/African-American</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Asian/other</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>5</b>

*Sources: Totals from California Secretary of State, while subgroup percentages are Field Poll estimates.*

### **Registered voter shifts across geographic regions**

Sizeable changes are also evident in the distribution of voters across major geographic regions of the state.

A larger share of voters now reside in California's interior than three decades ago. The proportion of California voters residing in the state's twenty coastal counties stands at 70%, down 8 percentage points from 1978. Conversely, the proportion of registered voters living in inland counties has grown 8 percentage points to 30%.

A declining proportion of registered voters now reside in the state's two major metropolitan areas, Los Angeles County and the San Francisco Bay Area. Los Angeles County now comprises 25% and the Bay Area 21% of the state's voters. Collectively, voters in these regions now account for 46% of all voters, down 9 percentage points from 1978 when 55% of the electorate resided there.

There has been a corresponding increase in the proportion of the state's electorate who live in the Inland Empire (10%, +4 points), the Central Valley (17%, + 3 points) and Orange/San Diego (19%, +2 points).

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**Table 4**  
**Changes in California's Registered Voter Population**  
**by Area and Region (2009 vs. 1978)**

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	<u>2009</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>△</u>
<b><u>Geographic Area</u></b>			
Coastal counties	70%	78%	-8
Inland counties	30	22	+8
<b><u>Region</u></b>			
Los Angeles County	25%	31%	-6
San Francisco Bay Area	21	24	-3
Orange/San Diego	18	17	+1
Central Valley	17	14	+3
Inland Empire	10	6	+4
All other areas	9	8	+1

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*Source: California Secretary of State*

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### **Geographic shifts within each party**

There has been greater geographic change in the composition of the Republican Party than the Democratic Party over the past thirty years. In 1978 over three in four Republicans (78%) resided in the state's twenty coastal counties and just 22% lived in an inland county. Now, 63% live in a coastal county, while 37% reside inland.

In addition, whereas about half (49%) of rank-and-file Republicans lived in the metropolitan areas of Los Angeles County and the San Francisco Bay Area in 1978, the proportion of GOPers now living in these regions has declined to 33%. Meanwhile, the proportion of Republicans living in either the Central Valley (21%) or the Inland Empire (13%) has increased significantly.

While the proportion of the state's Democratic voters residing in Los Angeles County is down 4 points, the county still accounts for the largest share of Democrats in any region of the state (29%). In addition, a majority of Democrats (53%) continue to reside in the state's two largest metropolitan areas, Los Angeles County and the Bay Area.

The rapid growth in the number of non-partisan voters over the past thirty years has been fairly evenly distributed across the state and approximates the geographic distribution of the overall statewide electorate.

**Table 5**  
**Changes in Partisan Composition of California's Registered Voters by Area and Region (2009 vs. 1978)**

	<u>Democrats</u>		<u>Republicans</u>		<u>Non-partisan/other</u>	
	<u>2009</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>1978</u>
<b><u>Geographic Area</u></b>						
Coastal counties	77%	78%	63%	78%	75%	81%
Inland Counties	23	22	37	22	25	19
<b><u>Region</u></b>						
Los Angeles County	29%	33%	19%	28%	25%	24%
San Francisco Bay Area	24	25	14	21	23	30
Central Valley	15	14	21	13	14	13
Orange/San Diego	14	14	23	22	19	19
Inland Empire	9	6	13	7	9	5
All other areas	9	8	10	9	10	9

*Source: California Secretary of State*

### **Other changes in the demography of the state's registered voters**

Over the past thirty years many other demographic changes in the state's electorate have taken place with respect to voters' age, education, tenure, marital status and religion.

The overall electorate is now older on average than it was in 1978. Over three in four voters (68%) are now age 40 or older, up from 58% in 1978.

More registered voters are now college graduates (46%) than was the case thirty years ago (36%).

A larger proportion of the state's registered voters are homeowners (74%) than was true in 1978 (66%).

A declining proportion of registered voters are now separated, divorced or widowed (14%), while the proportions of voters who are married or living together (66%) or are single and never married (20%) have increased.

There has been a significant decline to 38% in the proportion of voters who are Protestants, down from 50% in 1978. At the same time, there has been a big increase in the proportion of voters who are affiliated with non-Christian religions (20%).

**Table 6**  
**Changes in California's Registered Voter Population**  
**Across Demographic Subgroups (2009 vs. 1978)**

	<u>2009</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>△</u>
<b><u>Gender</u></b>			
Female	53%	53%	--
Male	47	47	--
<b><u>Age</u></b>			
18 – 29	17%	23%	-6
30 – 39	15	19	-4
40 – 49	20	16	+4
50 – 59	20	17	+3
60 or older	28	25	+3
<b><u>Education</u></b>			
High school graduate or less	21%	35%	-14
Some college	33	29	+4
College graduate	46	36	+10
<b><u>Tenure</u></b>			
Homeowner	74%	66%	+8
Renter	26	34	-8
<b><u>Marital status</u></b>			
Married/living together	66%	62%	+4
Separated/divorced/widowed	14	23	-9
Single/never married	20	15	+5
<b><u>Religion</u></b>			
Protestant	38%	50%	-12
Catholic	26	24	+2
Other non-Christian	20	11	+9
No preference	16	15	+1

Source: Field Poll estimates.

### **Demographic changes by party**

The advancing age of California voters can be seen across all parties, with majorities of both Democrats and Republicans now age 50 or older. Even among non-partisans/others, who have always been a somewhat younger population, fewer are now under age 40 (49%) than was the case in 1978 (63%).

Higher levels of education are observed across voters of each party, although larger changes have occurred among the Democratic Party and non-partisans than Republicans.

Although the proportion of homeowners has increased across all segments since 1978, a larger proportion of Republicans (82%) than Democrats (72%) or non-partisans (63%) are homeowners.

There has been a decline in the proportion of voters within each party who are separated, divorced or widowed, and increases in the proportions who are either married or living together or are single and never married.

The declining share of Protestants in the overall electorate over the past three decades is more prominent among Democratic party voters than other voters. Currently just 29% of registered Democrats are Protestant, down from 43% in 1978. Catholics (31%) now comprise a larger share of Democrats than Protestants. By contrast, Protestants still comprise a majority (55%) of the state GOP, although this is down from 66% in 1978.

**Table 7**  
**Changes in the Partisan Composition of California's Registered Voters Across Demographic Subgroups (2009 vs. 1978)**

	<u>Democrats</u>		<u>Republicans</u>		<u>Non-partisan/other</u>	
	<u>2009</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>1978</u>
<b><u>Gender</u></b>						
Female	58%	54%	50%	51%	51%	47%
Male	42	46	50	49	49	53
<b><u>Age</u></b>						
18 – 29	15%	26%	12%	17%	29%	34%
30 – 39	14	19	13	18	20	29
40 – 49	18	15	22	18	20	14
50 – 59	22	17	20	19	19	11
60 or older	31	23	33	28	12	12
<b><u>Education</u></b>						
High school graduate or less	23%	41%	18%	28%	20%	35%
Some college	31	27	36	28	36	29
College graduate	46	32	46	44	44	36
<b><u>Tenure</u></b>						
Homeowner	72%	63%	82%	77%	63%	60%
Renter	28	37	18	23	37	40
<b><u>Marital status</u></b>						
Married/living together	63%	58%	73%	68%	59%	51%
Separated/divorced/widowed	17	25	13	21	11	28
Single/never married	20	17	14	11	30	21
<b><u>Religion</u></b>						
Protestant	29%	43%	55%	66%	30%	36%
Catholic	31	29	23	17	22	23
Other non-Christian	23	13	14	8	23	17
No preference	17	15	8	9	25	24

Source: Field Poll estimates.

### **About *The Field Poll's* Registered Voter Estimates**

The estimates of the 2009 demographic characteristics of California's registered voter population presented in this report are derived from the nine most recent statewide surveys conducted by *The Field Poll* completed through May 2009. These surveys were conducted with a combined total of 9,257 registered voters in California. Each survey was conducted by telephone with known registered voters sampled from a statewide list of all registered voters in California. Estimates of the demographic characteristics of registered voters within each party are based on a combined total of 3,942 registered Democrats, 3,334 registered Republicans and 1,981 voters registered as decline to state or with a minor party. Interviews were conducted with voters on either their landline phone or their cell phone. After the completion of each survey, the results were weighted slightly to *Field Poll* estimates of the demographic and regional characteristics of the state's registered voter population.

The estimates of the 1978 demographic characteristics of California's registered voter population are based on statewide surveys conducted by *The Field Poll* among a combined total of 4,072 registered voters in four separate surveys that year. Estimates of the demographic characteristics of registered voters within each party are based on a combined total of 2,207 registered Democrats, 1,517 registered Republicans and 348 voters registered as declined to state or with a minor party in that year.

Sampling error estimates applicable to probability-based surveys depend upon its sample size. According to statistical theory, 95% of the time the 2009 results based on a sample of 9,257 registered voters are subject to a maximum sampling error of +/- 1.1 percentage points, while the 1978 findings based on a total of 4,072 interviews would have a maximum sampling error of +/- 1.6 percentage points. The maximum sampling error is based on percentages in the middle of the sampling distribution (e.g., percentages around 50%). Percentages at either end of the distribution (e.g., percentages around 10% or 90%) would have a smaller margin of error. The maximum sampling error will be larger for percentages based on subgroups of the overall sample.