

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 2):

**VOTERS, ESPECIALLY DEMOCRATS,
HAVE BECOME MORE SOCIALLY
TOLERANT ON A NUMBER OF ISSUES
OVER THE PAST THREE DECADES.**

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By Mark DiCamillo and Mervin Field

California voters, especially Democrats, have become more socially tolerant on a number of issues like same-sex marriage, abortion and euthanasia over the past three decades. On other issues like the death penalty and Proposition 13, voter attitudes have changed relatively little, with each supported by greater than two to one margins. Meanwhile, views about California as a place to live have declined sharply from levels observed three decades ago.

These are the top-line findings from the second of a special two-part *Field Poll* report examining the changing California electorate over the past three decades. Yesterday's report reviewed the changes that have occurred in the demographic composition of the state's registered voters, both overall and by party. Today's story compares voter attitudes now to those held by California voters in the late 1970's on a number of important social and political issues.

... Perhaps most dramatic has been the change in voter attitudes about same-sex marriage. A March 2009 *Field Poll* found 49% of registered voters in favor of allowing same sex marriage, while 44% were opposed. This contrasts with its views in 1978 when opponents outnumbered supporters of same-sex marriage two to one (62% to 31%). Californians' greater acceptance of allowing same-sex marriage has come entirely from the changing views of Democrats and non-partisans rather than Republicans.

... Support for allowing abortion in California has also grown since the mid-1970's. Seven in ten voters (70%) in a recent *Field Poll* supported and 22% opposed current laws allowing abortion. In 1975 a narrower 51% to 41% plurality approved of allowing abortion in the mother's first trimester. This is also primarily the result of greater acceptance for allowing abortion among Democrats and non-partisans rather than Republicans.

... Voter support for allowing incurably ill patients the right to ask for and get life-ending medication has continued to grow over the past thirty years from 63% to 69%. This increase is derived from a 20 percentage-point increase in the support of Democrats.

... Support for the death penalty remains strong at 67%, although this is down some from the mid-1970's when 74% were in favor.

... Voter support for Proposition 13, the landmark property tax reduction initiative approved by voters in 1978, has changed little over the past thirty years. In 1978 a pre-election *Field Poll* showed that among all registered voters, Prop. 13 was supported 57% to 34%, and it eventually was approved by a 65% to 35% margin in the June 1978 election. Last year on the occasion of Prop. 13's thirtieth anniversary, The *Field Poll* found that 57% of voters remained supportive of the initiative, 23% were opposed and 20% were undecided. Backing for Prop. 13 has been remarkably stable across Democrats, Republicans and non-partisans over the past three decades.

... Californians' assessments of the state as a place to live have declined sharply since the late 1970's. In 1977 over three in four registered voters (76%) described California as "one of the best places to live." Now, just 41% of registered voters say this about their state. Declines in voter assessments of California as a place to live are seen across party lines, but are most pronounced among Republicans.

Big increase in support for allowing same-sex marriage attributable to changing views of Democrats and non-partisans rather than Republicans

Among the most significant changes in voter attitudes over the past thirty years has been an increasing level of support for allowing same-sex couples to marry. In 1977 voters opposed allowing same-sex marriage by a two to one margin (62% to 31%). When *The Field Poll* asked the same question this year opinions are far different, with 49% of registered voters supportive and 44% opposed.

Californians' greater acceptance of allowing same-sex marriage has come entirely from the changing views of registered Democrats and non-partisans rather than Republicans. Democratic voter views have shifted from greater than two-to-one opposition in 1977 to greater than two-to-one support this year. Similarly, where non-partisans opposed allowing same-sex couples to marry three decades ago by a five-to-three margin, now they support it five to three.

Republicans, on the other hand, have not changed their views on this issue, and if anything, are now more opposed than they were thirty years ago. A nearly three to one majority of Republicans (68% to 23%) currently opposes allowing same-sex marriage in California. This is slightly greater than their 65% to 30% opposition found in a 1977 *Field Poll*.

Table 1
Changes in California registered voter views about
SAME-SEX MARRIAGE over the past three decades

	Approve	Disapprove	No opinion
<u>Total registered voters</u>			
2009	49%	44	7
1977	31%	62	7
<u>Democrats</u>			
2009	64%	30	6
1977	29%	63	8
<u>Republicans</u>			
2009	23%	68	9
1977	30%	65	5
<u>Non-partisans/others*</u>			
2009	57%	38	5
1977*	38%	55	7

* Small sample base.

Increase in support for laws allowing abortion since 1975 due mostly to growing Democratic and non-partisan support

California voters have also become more accepting of allowing abortion over the past three decades. A 1975 Field Poll found state voters to be narrowly in favor (51% to 41%) of allowing abortion when a women desired it during the first three months of pregnancy. Since then voter acceptance of existing laws allowing abortion has grown to a greater than three to one margin (70% to 22%) in a recent 2006 survey.

Californians' greater support for allowing abortion over the past thirty years is also primarily the result of more acceptance among Democrats and non-partisans than Republicans. Greater than eight in ten Democrats (82%) favor granting women the right to an abortion, a 30 percentage-point increase from 1975. Nearly three in four non-partisans (73%) also approve of allowing abortion, up 14 points from the mid-1970's. Among Republicans 55% support allowing abortion, up only marginally from thirty years earlier.

Table 2
Changes in California registered voter views about
ABORTION over the past three decades

	<u>Approve</u>	<u>Disapprove</u>	<u>No opinion</u>
<u>Total registered voters</u>			
2006	70%	22	8
1975	51%	41	8
<u>Democrats</u>			
2006	82%	10	8
1975	52%	43	5
<u>Republicans</u>			
2006	55%	40	5
1975	50%	40	10
<u>Non-partisans/others*</u>			
2006	73%	14	13
1975	59%	34	7

* Small sample base.

Increased support for allowing euthanasia for incurably ill patients comes from greater backing by Democrats

The majority of California voters who favor allowing incurably ill patients the right to ask for and get life-ending medication is slightly larger now than it was three decades ago. In 1975, 63% of voters approved of this practice. Thirty decades later a 2006 *Field Poll* found support had grown to 69%.

Voters' greater acceptance of allowing euthanasia comes from a big gain in the support of registered Democrats. Between 1975 and 2006, Democrats who favor allowing euthanasia has increased from 60% to 80%. Over the same period slightly smaller majorities of Republicans and non-partisans reported approving of the practice.

Table 3
Changes in California registered voter views about
EUTHANASIA over the past three decades

	<u>Approve</u>	<u>Disapprove</u>	<u>No opinion</u>
<u>Total registered voters</u>			
2006	69%	21	10
1975	63%	29	8
<u>Democrats</u>			
2006	80%	10	10
1975	60%	30	10
<u>Republicans</u>			
2006	59%	30	11
1975	66%	29	5
<u>Non-partisans/others*</u>			
2006	63%	28	9
1975	73%	24	3

* Small sample base.

Two in three voters continue to support the death penalty, although this is down some from three decades earlier

Californians' support of the death penalty as a form of punishment for certain crimes remains strong and includes two in three voters (67%), according to a recent 2006 *Field Poll*. This represents a decline from 1975 when 74% of California voters favored this form of punishment.

Majorities of voters in each political party remained in favor of maintaining the death penalty in 2006, with small declines in approval registered since 1975.

Table 4
Changes in California registered voter views about
THE DEATH PENALTY over the past three decades

	Approve	Disapprove	No opinion
<u>Total registered voters</u>			
2006	67%	29	4
1975	74%	21	5
<u>Democrats</u>			
2006	55%	40	5
1975	65%	28	7
<u>Republicans</u>			
2006	81%	16	3
1975	85%	11	4
<u>Non-partisans/others*</u>			
2006	67%	29	4
1975	76%	21	3

* Small sample base.

Continuing voter support of Proposition 13

Voter opinions of Proposition 13, the landmark property tax reduction initiative approved by voters in 1978, have changed little over the past thirty years. Prior to the historic June 1978 election, a pre-election *Field Poll* found registered voters supporting passage of Prop. 13 by a 57% to 34% margin, with 9% undecided. On election day the measure was approved 65% to 35%.

Last year on the occasion of Prop. 13's thirtieth anniversary, The *Field Poll* asked registered voters how they would vote if Prop. 13 were up for a vote again. The results show that support for Prop. 13 has remained strong, with 57% in favor, 23% opposed and 20% undecided.

Backing for Prop. 13 has been remarkably stable across Democrats, Republicans and non-partisans over the past thirty years. Among Democrats 48% were supportive in 2008, similar to 49% who said this in 1978. Among Republicans 72% favored Prop. 13 in 2008, close to the 70% level of support found in 1978. Among non-partisans 53% continued to back Prop. 13 in 2008. In 1978, 51% felt this way.

Table 5
Changes in California registered voter views about
PROPOSITION 13 over the past three decades

	<u>Approve</u>	<u>Disapprove</u>	<u>No opinion</u>
<u>Total registered voters</u>			
2008	57%	23	20
1978	57%	34	9
<u>Democrats</u>			
2008	48%	30	22
1978	49%	40	11
<u>Republicans</u>			
2008	72%	13	15
1978	70%	25	5
<u>Non-partisans/others</u>			
2008	53%	26	21
1978	51%	34	15

Big declines in voter assessments of California as a place to live

Voter assessments of California as a place to live have declined markedly since the late 1970's. In 1977 over three in four registered voters (76%) described California as "one of the best places to live." By comparison a *Field Poll* conducted earlier this year found just 41% of registered voters describing the state in these terms.

Declines in voter assessments of California as a place to live are seen across party lines, but are most pronounced among Republicans. At present, just 30% of the state's Republicans think the state is one of the best places to live. This is down 50 points from 1977, when 80% of GOPers considered the state one of the best places to live. Assessments of Democrats and non-partisans have also declined. Slightly less than half of Democrats (45%) and non-partisans (49%) described California as one of the best places to live earlier this year, a decline of 28 and 27 points, respectively, from 1977.

Table 6
Changes in California registered voter views about
CALIFORNIA AS A PLACE TO LIVE over the past three decades

	One of the best places	Nice but not outstanding	About average	Poor place	No opinion
<u>Total registered voters</u>					
2009	41%	25	22	9	3
1977	76%	13	9	1	1
<u>Democrats</u>					
2009	45%	27	19	7	2
1977	73%	14	11	*	2
<u>Republicans</u>					
2009	30%	27	23	15	5
1977	80%	11	6	2	*
<u>Non-partisans/others</u>					
2009	49%	19	26	5	1
1977**	76%	14	10	*	*

* Less than 1/2 of 1%.

** Small sample base.

About This Report

Sample Details

The findings summarized in this report are derived from a number of different statewide The Field Poll surveys conducted over the past three decades. Findings from the 2009, 2008 and 2006 surveys represent the most recent *Field Poll* conducted on each topic. The following are some survey details about the specific polls referenced in this report.

- 2009 findings reporting voter attitudes toward same-sex marriage and California as a place to live are based on a survey of 761 registered voters statewide conducted February 20-March 1, 2009.
- 2008 findings reporting voter attitudes toward Proposition 13 are based on a survey of 1,052 registered voters statewide conducted May 17-26, 2008.
- 2006 findings reporting voter attitudes toward the death penalty, abortion, and euthanasia are based on a survey of 680 registered voters statewide conducted February 12-26, 2006.
- 1978 findings about voter attitudes toward Proposition 13 are based on a survey of 1,317 registered voters statewide conducted May 29-31, 1978.
- 1977 findings about voter attitudes of California as a place to live are based on a survey of 700 registered voters statewide conducted March 9-19, 1977.
- 1977 findings about voter attitudes about same-sex marriage are based on a survey of 813 registered voters conducted June 17-July 2, 1977.
- 1975 findings reporting voter attitudes toward the death penalty, abortion and euthanasia are based on a survey of 1,011 registered voters statewide conducted February 15-March 3, 1975.

Questions Asked

Same-sex marriage

(both 1977 and 2009) Do you approve or disapprove of California allowing homosexuals to marry members of their own sex and have regular marriage laws apply to them?

Abortion

(1975) Do you approve or disapprove of allowing abortion in the first three months of a mother pregnancy?

(2006) 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?

Euthanasia

(both 1975 and 2006) Do you think an incurably ill patient should have the right to ask for and get medication that would painlessly end his or her life?

Death penalty

(both 1975 and 2006) As you know, California 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 the death sentence should be kept as a punishment for serious crimes?

California as a place to live

(both 1977 and 2009) How would you rate California as a place to live? Would you say it is one of the best places to live, a nice but not outstanding place to live, about an average place to live or a poor place to live?

Proposition 13

(1978) If you were voting today would you vote Yes or No on Proposition 13?

(2008) Thirty years ago in 1978 California voters approved Propositions 13, which reduced local property taxes and limited the amount they could be increased each year. . . If Proposition 13 were up for a vote again today, do you think you would vote in favor of it or vote against it?