AT ISSUE

PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE OF CALIFORNIA

CALIFORNIA'S EXCLUSIVE ELECTORATE

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In general, the people who go to the polls in California are very different from those who don't—and they have different political attitudes and preferences. As California's population has burgeoned, its voting rolls have not kept pace. As its population has become more diverse, its voters have become less representative of that population. And the difference between voters and nonvoters is especially stark in attitudes toward government's role; elected officials; and many social issues, policies, and programs.

These disparities could be a problem for any state and are not unique to California.[1] However, they could be more problematic for California—a state that calls on its voters not only to elect representatives but to make so much policy through ballot initiatives. This AT ISSUE looks at the growing gap between voters and nonvoters since 1990, describes their demographic and attitudinal differences, considers the implications, and discusses ways to create a larger and more representative electorate.

WHO VOTES, WHO DOESN'T, AND HOW THEY DIFFER

California's electorate does not reflect the size, the growth, or the diversity of California's population. Today, eight in 10 adults are eligible to vote but just 56 percent are registered, less than half (43%) belong to one of the major parties, and only 35 percent of adults can be expected to vote in the November election. Voter registration has grown at a slower rate than the population. As a result, 12 million of the state's 27.7 million adults are not registered to vote. Moreover, although the state has become increasingly diverse, the adults who frequently vote are predominantly white, age 45 and older, and relatively affluent. In contrast, nonvoters (those who are not registered to vote) are mostly nonwhite, younger, and less affluent than frequent (or "likely") voters.

Besides their demographic differences, likely voters and nonvoters have very different political views. Likely voters are deeply divided about the role of government, satisfied with initiatives that limit government, relatively positive about the state's elected leaders, and ambivalent and divided along party lines on ballot measures that would spend more on the poor. In contrast, the state's nonvoters want a more active government, are less satisfied with initiatives that limit government, are less positive about elected officials, and favor ballot measures that would spend more on programs to help the poor.

Because so many Californians are nonvoters, their attitudes often reflect overall public opinion on issues. Yet, those who do vote often have very different views, and their preferences prevail at the ballot box.

Those are the facts about California's electorate in a nutshell. The pages that follow break out the trends in political participation over a 16-year period (1990–2006) and provide detail on the demographic and political profiles of frequent voters, those not registered to vote, and the overall adult population. The facts provided are based on analyses of state data sources and recent results from the PPIC Statewide Surveys.[2]

12 million of the state's 27.7 million adults are not registered to vote.

FIGURE 1. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION LAGS POPULATION GROWTH

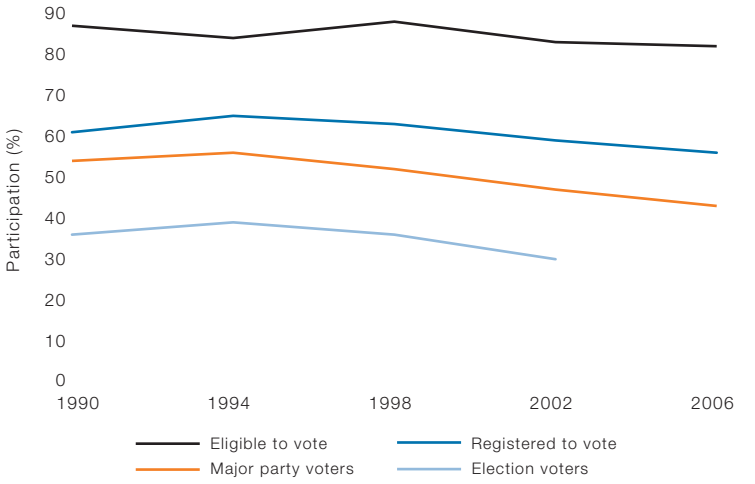


TABLE 1. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BY THE NUMBERS

	Millions of Participants	
	1990	**2006**
Adults age 18+	22.0	27.7
Eligible to vote	19.2	22.6
Registered to vote	13.5	15.6
Major party voters	12.0	12.0
Election voters	7.9	—

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION HAS NOT KEPT PACE WITH POPULATION GROWTH

Since 1990, California's total population has increased by about 25 percent and so has the percentage of adults age 18 or older—the base for registered voters.[3] Yet, voter registration has increased by only about 15 percent. As a result, just over half of the adult population—56 percent—is registered to vote in California elections today, compared to a high of 65 percent in 1994.[4]

Immigration's contribution to the state's growth explains some of this discrepancy, since registered voters must be either U.S.-born or naturalized citizens. In fact, the percentage of adults eligible to vote this year is five points lower than in 1990 (1990, 87%; 2006, 82%), and some of this decline may reflect the increasing share of noncitizens in the adult population: Among the 12 million nonvoters today, seven million are eligible but five million are not eligible to vote.

Despite the increase in the number ineligible, the vast majority of California adults are eligible to vote in elections. Yet, voter turnout has dropped to new lows in recent years.[5] Since 1990, only about 35 percent of all adults have voted in the four statewide elections that included the selection of governor and other executive branch offices and federal and state legislators, as well as many state propositions. (Presidential elections have higher turnouts; however, the California primaries have lower turnouts.)

Political party membership has also declined over the past 16 years. The percentage of California adults registered as major party voters has dropped from 54 percent to 43 percent. There were 12 million voters registered as Democrats and Republicans in 1990; there are 12 million today. Almost all the growth in registration rolls has been in "decline to state"—independent voters who choose not to declare membership in one of the two major parties. For the first time in modern California history, the majority of adults do not belong to one of the major parties.

CALIFORNIA VOTERS DO NOT REFLECT THE STATE'S RACIAL DIVERSITY

In a democracy, low political participation is cause for worry, in and of itself. If a small electorate is also not representative of the population on other dimensions, there is even greater cause for concern.

Analysis of thousands of interviews from the PPIC Statewide Surveys shows that California's likely voters are disproportionately white and native born. By 2000, California had become the first large majority minority state—that is, a state in which no ethnic or racial group constitutes the majority. Today, the California adult population is 46 percent white and 32 percent Latino; the remaining 22 percent are Asian (12%), black (6%), and other. Yet, seven in 10 California likely voters are white, only one in six is Latino, and the remainder are Asian, black, and other. Moreover, even though one in three adults is foreign-born, about nine in 10 of the Californians who frequently vote in the state's elections were born in this country.[6]

VOTERS AND NONVOTERS: THE HAVES AND THE HAVE-NOTS

Likely voters are also unrepresentative in demographic characteristics such as age and socioeconomic status. The majority of Californians who are frequent voters are age 45 and older (62%), homeowners (77%), and college graduates (53%), with household incomes of $60,000 or more (56%). The majority of California nonvoters are under age 45 (76%) and renters (66%); fewer than one in five is a college graduate (17%) or earns $60,000 or more (18%). On all these dimensions, both likely voters and nonvoters are distinct from all California adults.[7]

LIKELY VOTERS AND NONVOTERS SEE THE POLITICAL WORLD DIFFERENTLY

Voters and nonvoters not only differ in background but generally have different political perceptions and attitudes on key issues. These issues include limits on government, government spending preferences, elected officials' performance, and ballot choices.

FIGURE 2. VOTERS DO NOT REPRESENT THE STATE'S RACIAL DIVERSITY

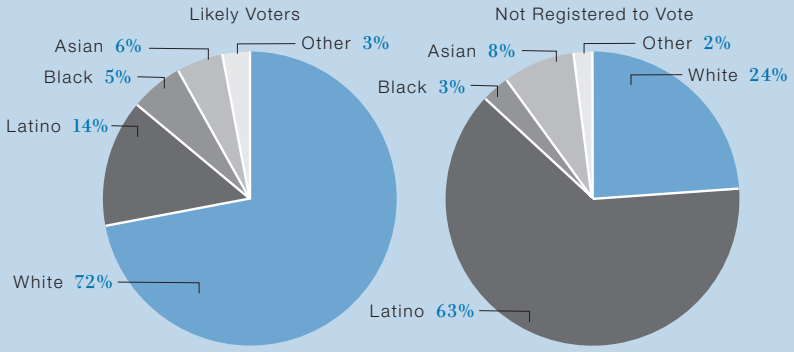


FIGURE 3. VOTERS' RELATIVE AFFLUENCE: HOMEOWNERSHIP

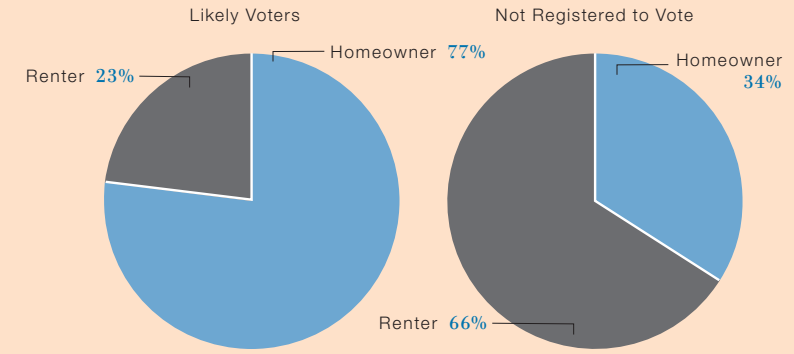
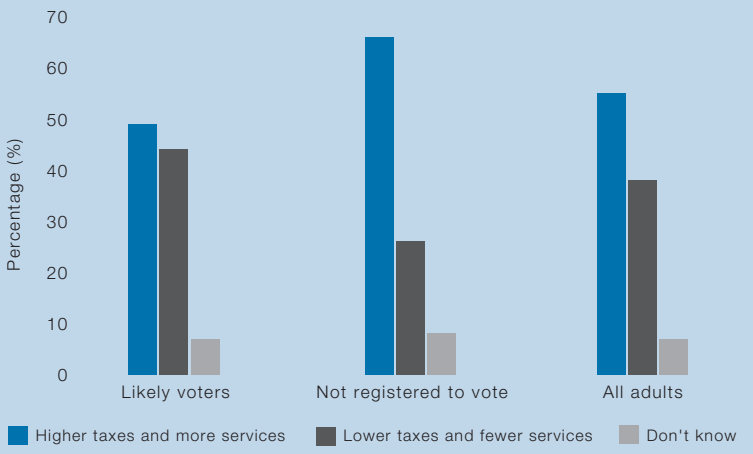


FIGURE 4. THE PREFERENCE GAP ON ROLE OF GOVERNMENT



Source: PPIC Statewide Survey, May 2006

Because there are so many nonvoters in the state, their attitudes and preferences often dominate public political opinion on particular issues or topics. However, likely voters' views prevail at the ballot box. This is particularly ironic given that nonvoters are almost as positive as likely voters in their attitudes about making policy through the citizens' initiative processes in California.[8]

Limits on Government

How much government do Californians want? Put another way, would they prefer to pay more taxes and have a government that offers more services or pay less and have a government that offers less? Most California adults prefer higher taxes and more services over lower taxes and fewer services (55% to 38%). But there is a wide gap on this issue between voters and nonvoters, between the haves and the have-nots.[9]

California's likely voters are almost evenly divided when asked if they would prefer to pay higher taxes and have a state government that provides more services or lower taxes and fewer services (49% to 44%). This reflects the deeper division between Democrats and Republicans on this issue. Among nonvoters, two in three want to see more services and higher taxes.

The haves and the have-nots also differ on limiting government's ability to tax.[10] Take the matter of Proposition 13, which both limits the amount of property tax that can be levied and sets the voting requirements for local special taxes. Most nonvoters, and public opinion overall, are negative about these effects of Proposition 13; but it has proven virtually unassailable, given voters' views.

By a large margin (56% to 33%), likely voters (mostly homeowners) believe that Proposition 13 turned out to be a good thing rather than a bad thing for California. Nearly half (49%) are also comfortable with the fact that Proposition 13 (and rising prices) can make recent homebuyers pay higher property taxes than those who purchased a similar home in the same neighborhood several years before.

In contrast, nonvoters (mostly renters) are more likely to see Proposition 13 as a bad thing than a good thing (47% to 29%). They are very negative about the differential tax rate for new and long-term homeowners (68% oppose, 20% favor).

Likely voters and nonvoters differ, again, on the benefits of limiting state legislators' terms in office. Two in three likely voters described the effects of term limits imposed by initiative since 1990 as a good thing, 13 percent said it made no difference, and 18 percent said it had been a bad thing for California. In contrast, fewer than half (46%) of nonvoters said it was a good thing, with just as many describing the effects of term limits as making no difference (33%) or a bad thing (14%) for California.[11]

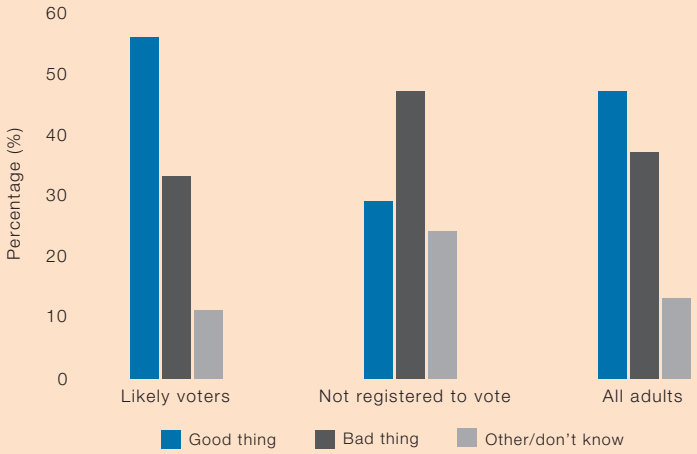
Spending Preferences

Similar tension is evident in spending preferences—about both where the money should be spent and who should benefit. As an example of where, six in 10 Californians would like to see state government spend more on health and human services and public colleges and universities. However, just 50 percent of likely voters share that preference, in contrast to seven in 10 nonvoters.[12]

As an example of who should benefit, Californians are keenly aware that lower-income areas have schools with fewer resources than other areas. More adults favor than oppose (49% to 44%) the policy of providing more funding for those schools even if it means less for other areas.[13] Although nonvoters strongly hold this view (54% to 40%), it would be unlikely to prevail if put to an initiative vote: Likely voters are ambivalent and deeply divided along party lines on providing funding for lower-income schools at the expense of other areas (47% to 47%).

FIGURE 5. THE PREFERENCE GAP ON GOVERNMENT LIMITATIONS

Has Proposition 13 turned out to be mostly a good thing or mostly a bad thing for California?



Are term limits a good thing or a bad thing for California?

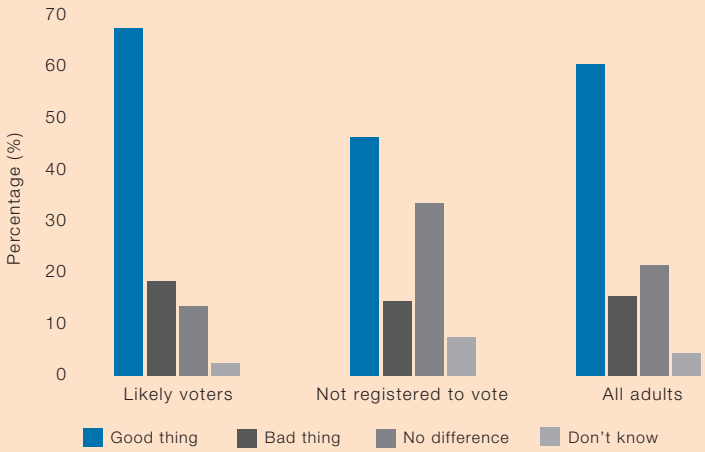
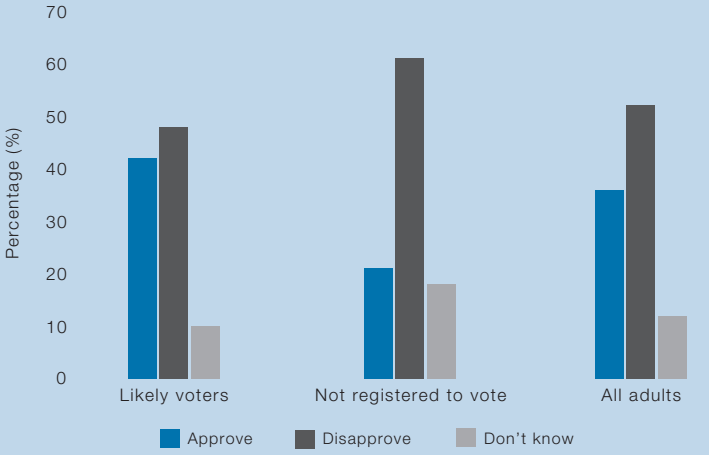
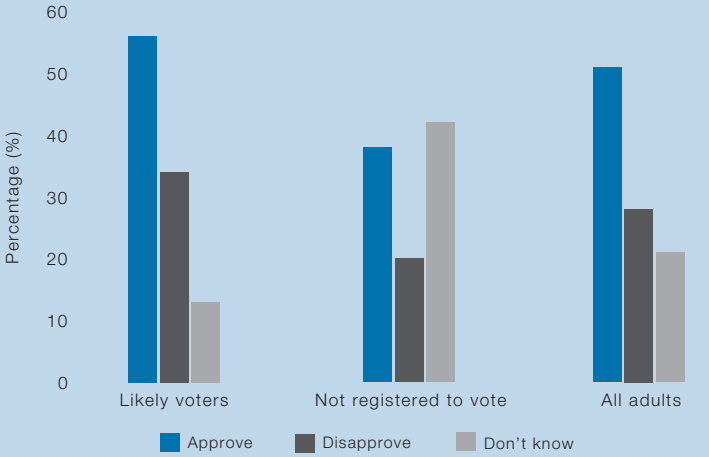


FIGURE 6. THE RATINGS GAP FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS

Do you approve or disapprove of the way that Arnold Schwarzenegger is handling his job as governor of California?



Do you approve or disapprove of the way that Dianne Feinstein is handling her job as U.S. Senator?



Elected Officials' Ratings

Californians will go to the polls this fall to select a governor, U.S. senator, and federal and state representatives. Given the different attitudes likely voters and nonvoters have toward elected officials, candidates might feel fortunate about who does and who doesn't go to the polls. Although they are divided along party lines, likely voters tend to be much more positive than nonvoters about their elected officials. The result is that the views of all California adults are more negative than may be reflected in November's election outcomes.

Governor Schwarzenegger's ratings are a good example. Only 36 percent of all adults say that they approve of the job he is doing. However, in May 2006, 42 percent of likely voters said that they approved (48% disapproved) of his performance, with Republicans strongly approving and Democrats strongly disapproving. Among nonvoters, 61 percent disapproved and only 21 percent approved of their governor's performance in office.[14]

U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D) also faces reelection in November. As she seeks a third six-year term, the future looks less cloudy. Just over 50 percent of all adults approve of the job she is doing. However, among likely voters her positive ratings are much higher (56% approve, 34% disapprove) than among nonvoters (38% approve, 20% disapprove, and 42% don't know).[15]

When it comes to the performance of their congressional representatives, just over half of all adults approve, which puts them squarely between likely voters and nonvoters. Among likely voters, 59 percent approve and 25 percent disapprove. Among nonvoters, 41 percent approve, 23 percent disapprove, and 36 percent don't know.

The one area of broad public consensus is the relatively low ranking of California legislators. Both likely voters (41% approve, 45% disapprove) and nonvoters (37% approve, 37% disapprove) offer mixed evaluations of their state legislators in the Assembly and State Senate; and Democrats and Republicans do not differ much in their evaluations.[16]

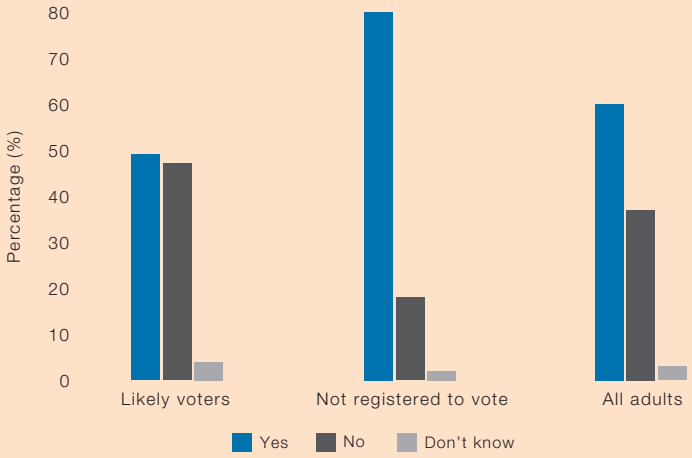
Ballot Choices

Californians frequently have to vote on state propositions that make important fiscal and economic policy decisions. Likely voters are often closely divided—with deeply different views along partisan lines—on initiatives aimed at low-income groups, whereas they usually favor measures that provide benefits to people like themselves. Nonvoters, in stark contrast, are solid supporters of increased government spending and new programs that benefit the poor.[17]

Part of the $37 billion infrastructure package on this November's ballot is a measure calling for a $3 billion state bond to pay for new affordable housing.[18] In our May 2006 polling on this issue, likely voters and nonvoters both strongly support the other, larger elements of the infrastructure package, which would provide state funding for surface transportation, school facilities, and flood protection. Indeed, public support is strong across parties for these bond measures. The accord ends there. Fewer than half of likely voters (49%)—most of whom are relatively affluent and homeowners—would vote in favor of the affordable housing bond, and they are deeply divided along party lines. In contrast, 80 percent of nonvoters—most of whom are renters with lower incomes—would (if they were registered) vote for this ballot measure. Consequently, the measure would pass among all adults but, as of this writing, not the likely voters who will decide its fate.

FIGURE 7. THE PREFERENCE GAP ON FUNDING AFFORDABLE HOUSING

If the election were held today, how would you vote on a bond of about $3 billion for new affordable housing?



Although whites are projected to be one-third of the state's adults by 2040, they are still expected to be the majority of voters in 25 years.

As shown in our August 2004 survey, likely voters and nonvoters also differ on local ballot measures to fund schools and raise taxes for transportation programs. This is especially relevant since a two-thirds vote is needed to pass any local special tax. For example, barely two-thirds of likely voters would support a bond measure for local school construction, but three in four nonvoters favor this measure. Similarly, 66 percent of likely voters would increase the local transportation sales tax, compared to 71 percent of nonvoters. Thus, local fiscal measures that would easily pass among all adults may fall just short of the two-thirds majority among voters, largely because of partisan differences.[19]

FUTURE PROSPECTS AND CONSEQUENCES

The voter gaps in participation, demographic profile, and preferences are occurring in an era of population growth and social and economic change. State experts point to the fact that we are in the middle of a demographic transition that will continue in California and that the political effects of the change will continue for decades. However, although whites are projected to be one-third of the state's adults by 2040, they are still expected to be the majority of voters in 25 years.[20]

What are the consequences of uneven participation rates and low voter turnout? First, the fact that a relatively small group of voters is making the decisions about elected representatives and public policy can raise serious questions about the legitimacy of the democratic system. Next, because the haves in society are the frequent voters, and so many of the have-nots are not even registering to vote, the voting preferences at the ballot box do not reflect the broad interests of all adults. Last, likely voters and nonvoters have very different perspectives on issues such as the role of government, limits on government, ratings of elected representatives, and ballot choices. California thus faces the prospect of an electorate making policy choices that neglect the realities and problems facing large segments of society.

POLICY OPTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

A number of policy changes could result in a broader participation in the political process, by increasing both the numbers and diversity of the electorate. At the federal level, any changes in immigration laws that make it easier for noncitizens to become U.S. citizens could greatly increase the numbers of adults who are eligible to register to vote. Currently, millions of California adults are not eligible to vote because of their immigration status. This is a constraint on growth in registration rolls.

As for state policies, any legislation that makes it easier to register to vote or vote in elections, such as Election Day registration or online voting, could increase the numbers of voters in state elections. Public and private efforts, such as targeted drives to increase voter registration in underrepresented groups (e.g., Latinos, Asians, youth, renters, immigrants), could result in more diversity in the electorate. Last, voter registration and voting in elections are closely related to college education, higher income, and homeownership. Thus, any efforts to increase education, encourage homeownership, and promote high-paying jobs could result in higher voter registration.[21]

What might happen if voters were more representative of the adult population? That would depend on how the decision to vote relates to socioeconomic differences and whether new voters' attitudes change. For ballot measures, there could be more voter support for policies that increased spending and taxes for state programs and calls to expand government's role in improving the lives of the less advantaged. For candidate elections, it is difficult to say if this would benefit the Republicans or the Democrats because so many of the newly registering voters are not in the major parties today. However, incumbents could face a more critical and less approving electorate. Since most new voters are registering as "decline to state," the power of independent voters in determining election outcomes of the major party races could be bolstered if this group continues to grow and the proportion of major party voters continues to shrink.

Currently, millions of California adults are not eligible to vote because of their immigration status.

Growth and change in the electorate could initially result in more political instability, as elected officials, candidates, parties, and initiative campaigns reach out to a larger, more diverse, less partisan, and unpredictable electorate.[22] Yet, in the long run, having a larger and more engaged electorate that is representative of the people of California would be a source of political stability for a state that increasingly relies on the ballot box to make its major policy decisions.

NOTES

1 Steven J. Rosenstone and Raymond E. Wolfinger, "The Effect of Registration Laws on Voter Turnout," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 72, No. 1, 1978, pp. 22–45; Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone, *Who Votes?* Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut,1980; Lee Sigelman, Philip W. Roeder, Malcolm E. Jewell, and Michael A. Baer, "Voting and Nonvoting: A Multi-Election Perspective," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 1985, pp. 749–756; Lee Ragsdale and Jerrold G. Rusk, "Who Are Nonvoters? Profiles from the 1990 Senate Elections," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 1993, pp. 721–746; Wendy Tam Cho, "Naturalization, Socialization, and Participation: Immigrants and Nonvoting," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 4, 1999, pp. 1140–1155; Eric Plutzer, "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 96, No. 1, 2002, pp. 41–56; Karthick Ramakrishnan, *Democracy in Immigrant America*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2005.

2 The PPIC Statewide Survey is an ongoing series directed by the author that uses random-digit dial telephone interviewing methods with at least 2,000 California adults per wave. Some of the analyses that follow include individual survey waves, and for more information on the methodology see the PPIC Statewide Survey reports. Some of the analyses involve data aggregated over 11 survey waves conducted from May 2005 to May 2006 to provide a large and representative sample of all adults (n = 23,516), likely voters in elections (n = 12,446), and those who say they are not registered to vote (n = 5,574). We exclude a sample of the "infrequent voters" (n = 5,449) in our comparisons that focus on differences between likely voters and those not registered to vote, although they are included in the responses for all adults. Infrequent voters are similar to likely voters in their immigrant status, similar to nonvoters in their age, and in between these two groups in socioeconomic status as reported in "California's Likely Voters," *Just the Facts*, Public Policy Institute of California, San Francisco, California, August 2005.

3 The population numbers in Figure 1, Table 1, and in the text in this section are from California Department of Finance, *Race/Ethnic Population with Age and Sex Detail, 1990–1999*, Sacramento, California, May 2004; California Department of Finance, *Estimated Race/Ethnic Population with Age and Sex Detail, 2000–2004*, Sacramento, California, April 2006; California Department of Finance, *Race/Ethnic Population with Age and Sex Detail, 2000–2050*, Sacramento, California, May 2004; U.S. Census Bureau, *Census 2000 Summary File 1*, Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C., 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, *Census 1990 Summary File 1*, Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C., 1991.

4 Voter statistics for Figure 1 and Table 1 and the voter numbers in the text in this section are from California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote, November 2004*, Sacramento, California, November 2004; California Secretary of State, *Report of Registration*, Sacramento, California, April 2006.

5 Mark Baldassare, *California in the New Millennium: The Changing Social and Political Landscape*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 2000; Mark Baldassare, *A California State of Mind: The Conflicted Voter in a Changing World*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 2002; Mark Baldassare, Bruce E. Cain, D. E. Apollonio, and Jonathan Cohen, *The Season of Our Discontent: Voters' Views on California Elections*, Public Policy Institute of California, San Francisco, California, 2004.

6 California Department of Finance, *Race/Ethnic Population with Age and Sex Detail, 2000–2050*, Sacramento, California, May 2004; U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey, 2004*, Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C., 2004; PPIC Statewide Surveys, May 2005 to May 2006; the percentages

in Figure 2 and in the text in this section are from combined PPIC Statewide Surveys, May 2005 to May 2006.

7 According to California Department of Finance, *Race/Ethnic Population with Age and Sex Detail, 2000–2050*, State of California, Sacramento, California, May 2004, and the 2000 U.S. Census, 47 percent of the adults are age 45 or older, 57 percent are homeowners, 24 percent are college graduates, and 39 percent of households have annual incomes of $60,000 or more; the percentages in Figure 3 and in the text in this section are from combined PPIC Statewide Surveys, May 2005 to May 2006.

8 "Californians and the Initiative Process," *Just the Facts*, Public Policy Institute of California, San Francisco, California, September 2005.

9 Percentages in Figure 4 and the numbers in the text in this section are from the PPIC Statewide Survey, May 2006.

10 Percentages in Figure 5 and the numbers in the text on Proposition 13 are from the PPIC Statewide Survey, May 2005.

11 Percentages in Figure 5 and the numbers in the text on term limits are from the PPIC Statewide Survey, May 2006.

12 Percentages in the text on state spending are from the PPIC Statewide Survey, May 2006.

13 Percentages in the text on school spending are from the PPIC Statewide Survey, April 2006.

14 Percentages in Figure 6 and the numbers in the text on governor's approval are from the PPIC Statewide Survey, May 2006.

15 Percentages in Figure 6 and the numbers in the text on Senator Feinstein's approval and congressperson's approval are from the PPIC Statewide Survey, March 2006.

16 The numbers in the text on state legislator's approval are from the PPIC Statewide Survey, May 2006.

17 Mark Baldassare, R. DeFever, and K. Michaud, *Making Health Policy at the Ballot Box*, Public Policy Institute of California, San Francisco, California, February 2005.

18 Percentages in Figure 7 and the numbers in the text on state bonds are from the PPIC Statewide Survey, May 2006.

19 Percentages in the text on local tax measures are from the PPIC Statewide Survey, August 2004.

20 Jack Citrin and Benjamin Highton, *How Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration Shape the California Electorate*, Public Policy Institute of California, San Francisco, California, December 2002; Ellen Hanak and Mark Baldassare, eds., *California 2025: Taking on the Future*, Public Policy Institute of California, San Francisco, California, June 2005.

21 See note 1.

22 Jack Citrin, E. Schickler, and J. Sides, "What If Everyone Voted?" *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 47, No. 1, 2003, pp. 75–90; Ellen Hanak and Mark Baldassare, *California 2025: Taking on the Future*, Public Policy Institute of California, San Francisco, California, August 2005.

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  - *Local elections*
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  - *Community integration*
  - *Migration patterns*
  - *Naturalization*
- Racial and ethnic populations
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Education: Ph.D. (1994), economics, University of California, Berkeley

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How Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration Shape the California Electorate
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