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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1xs4n3sf>

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Publication Date

2023-12-12

Peer reviewed

Voters' Views of Politics in California: Dissatisfaction, Distrust, and Withdrawal

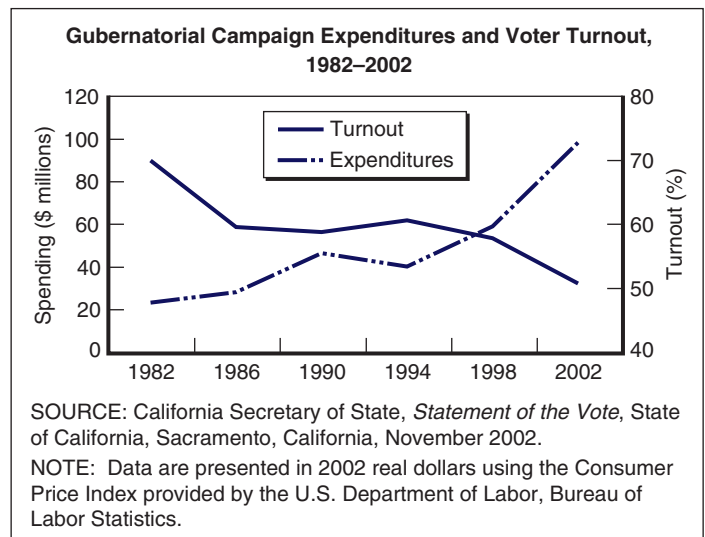
Over the past 20 years, two identifiable trends have emerged in California politics: Gubernatorial campaigns have spent increasing, record amounts of money—most of it on negative TV commercials attacking opponents. And at the same time, a growing percentage of voters have signaled their disaffection for this type of campaign by simply staying away from the polls. In *The Season of Our Discontent: Voters' Views on California Elections*, Mark Baldassare, Bruce E. Cain, D. E. Apollonio, and Jonathan Cohen use their findings from 10 surveys of over 20,000 Californians conducted during the 2002 election cycle to examine the disconnect between politicians and the public in California. They point to the fact that negative campaigning does damage not only to both opponents but also to the democratic process itself by sowing disillusion, distrust, and cynicism among the populace, many of whom then simply decide not to vote for either candidate.

The 2002 Election

The California governor's election in 2002 is widely regarded as one of the low points in the state's political history. After spending millions of dollars in the GOP primary to help defeat Richard Riordan, a political moderate, incumbent Democratic Governor Gray Davis narrowly defeated a political novice, Bill Simon, in a contest that will be best remembered for its nasty tone and lack of substance. Davis and Simon waged a campaign of harsh words from the outset that focused on attacks and counterattacks on each other's personal character, values, and integrity. The two candidates faced off in a live television debate on the issues only once during the fall campaign—at noon on a Monday, when many people were unable to watch it—preferring instead to spend their multimillion-dollar war chests on negative television commercials. In the end, the November 2002 election generated the highest campaign expenditures and the lowest voter turnout in state history. Less than a year later, in October 2003, the state's voters, in an unprecedented action, recalled the elected governor from office.

Voters' Perceptions of Political Campaigns

In recent years, Californians have grown increasingly dissatisfied with their candidate choices and the way campaigns are



Spending on state elections has increased dramatically whereas the turnout of registered voters has steadily declined, reflecting the public's dissatisfaction with political candidates and the types of campaigns they wage.

run in the state. During the fall 2002 election, only 41 percent of residents said that they were satisfied with the choice of candidates for governor. Nearly half of all likely voters (49%) said that elections had generally gotten worse, and 54 percent said that elections had gotten worse in terms of ethics and values. Although about eight in 10 Californians said that they had been exposed to campaign advertising in the course of the fall 2002 campaign, only one in four likely voters said that the candidate advertisements were helpful in making a decision about voting. Much of the dissatisfaction that Californians said they felt toward elections was focused on negative campaigning. When asked whether Davis and Simon should be critical of each other, 58 percent of respondents said they should not, because campaigns throughout the state were too negative.

In repeated pre-election surveys, seven in 10 Californians said that above all else, they wanted to know candidates' stands on the issues. In these same surveys, only three in 10 said that they were satisfied with the discussion of issues facing the state during the 2002 campaign. On top of this frustration with the

content of the campaign was disappointment with the means that the candidates use to deliver their messages. When asked how they preferred to learn about candidates, voters chose debates more than any other means of communication. About four in 10 Californians said that they would view candidates less favorably if they primarily used television commercials to get their messages to voters.

In sum, candidates hurt their own images by campaigning negatively, by providing inadequate information to voters, and by relying too heavily on television advertising to connect with the voters.

Political Campaigns and Distrust in Government

The PPIC Statewide Survey results suggest that negative perceptions of campaigns appear to be a contributing factor in declining trust of government, and confidence seems to be difficult to restore once the public loses faith in government. Californians' trust in state government declined during the 2002 election campaign and has not returned to previous levels in the wake of the recall of Davis and his replacement by Arnold Schwarzenegger. Trust in state government reached its peak in 2001 and early 2002, with nearly half of all Californians (47%) saying that they trusted state government to do what is right just about always or most of the time. By August 2002, only 37 percent of Californians said that they trusted the state government. In the months following the November 2002 election, trust in state government drifted even lower.

Public Support for Campaign Reform

The surveys asked respondents about a variety of campaign reforms that were chosen because they are the most likely to survive constitutional challenges: campaign finance reform, candidate debates, public disclosure, and voluntarily adopted codes and pledges of campaign conduct by the candidates. The surveys revealed considerable interest in changing the status quo of California's campaigns and elections on all of these dimensions.

Perhaps surprising, given the fiscally conservative nature of Californians, 57 percent of likely voters thought that public rather than private financing of campaigns was a good idea. This finding suggests that recent unsatisfying experiences with state campaigns, such as the 2002 governor's race with its record spending of nearly \$100 million, have made many voters receptive to the public paying the tab for the election process.

As noted above, in the PPIC Statewide Surveys, Californians have often expressed frustration with the emphasis of statewide political campaigns on 30-second television commercials. Two in three likely voters said that more debates in the 2002 gubernatorial contest would have made the election campaign better. And when asked whether they would favor or oppose an initiative that would require five prime-time broadcast gubernatorial debates, 60 percent favored the proposal.

Disclosure is a key ingredient in elections because voters need access to accurate information when making ballot choices. Among likely voters, 71 percent said that the immediate disclosure of campaign contributions would make them more favorably disposed toward a candidate.

Finally, for first amendment reasons, candidates cannot be compelled to avoid personal attacks and negative campaigns. But what if candidates can be induced to do so by signing pledges that they could be held accountable for during the course of a political campaign. California voters like this idea: Seventy-seven percent of likely voters said that they would view candidates more favorably if they signed a pledge or code of conduct to "run a truthful, fair, and clean campaign." Despite the practical limitations of such pledges, many voters favor the idea because pledges offer a greater likelihood of a campaign focusing on the issues—and a break from the negative tone of today's California campaigns.

Conclusions

The California public expressed a high level of dissatisfaction with the acrimonious tone of the 2002 governor's election, the limited access they had to the candidates, and the lack of attention to the issues confronting the state. If the current trends of public dissatisfaction and voter disengagement persist, it is likely that we will see a continuing trend of declining trust in state government and its elected officials, which could seriously affect the future of democratic society in California.

California voters are deeply dissatisfied and have indicated their preference for a new type of campaign behavior—increased financial disclosure, more public debates, campaign finance reform, and candidate codes of conduct—which could be implemented in time for the 2006 governor's election. It may well be that if the state government does not implement election reform, California's frustrated voters may take the matter into their own hands through the initiative process.

This research brief summarizes a report by Mark Baldassare, Bruce E. Cain, D. E. Apollonio, and Jonathan Cohen, The Season of Our Discontent: Voters' Views on California Elections (2004, 102 pp., \$12.00, ISBN 1-58213-086-8). The report may be ordered by phone at (800) 232-5343 [U.S. mainland] or (415) 291-4400 [Canada, Hawaii, overseas]. A copy of the full text is also available on the Internet (www.ppic.org). The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.
