

**UC Berkeley**

**California Journal of Politics and Policy**

**Title**

The Growing Political Might of Ethnic Voters in California and its Political Ramifications

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8p6131jj>

**Journal**

California Journal of Politics and Policy, 6(3)

**Author**

DiCamillo, Mark J.

**Publication Date**

2014-07-01

**DOI**

10.5070/P22W2C

Peer reviewed

Mark J. DiCamillo\*

## The Growing Political Might of Ethnic Voters in California and its Political Ramifications

**Abstract:** The rapid growth of the state's Latino and Asian American voting populations, coupled with their increasing preference for Democratic candidates, have transformed electoral politics in California over the past 20 years. It is no coincidence that since voter registration among the state's Latinos and Asian Americans began their ascent in the mid-1990s California has changed from a very competitive "purple state" in presidential elections to one of the nation's bluest of blue states. According to Field Poll estimates, more than 90% of the net 3.3 million increase in the state's registered voters since 1994 has come from the ranks of Latinos and Asian-Americans. This paper traces the growth of Latinos and Asian Americans within the state's electorate over the past 20 years and examines their growing preference for Democratic candidates in presidential elections during this period. It also compares the opinions of ethnic voters to White non-Hispanic voters on a number of prominent political and social issues through the ongoing statewide survey measurements of the non-partisan Field Poll. The results shed light on the reasons why ethnic voters are increasingly aligning themselves with the Democratic Party. And, because these demographic changes are expected to continue into the foreseeable future, bodes ill for the long-term electoral fortunes of the California Republican Party.

**Keywords:** African-American vote; Asian-American vote; California politics; ethnic voters; Latino vote.

---

\*Corresponding author: Mark J. DiCamillo, Senior Vice President, Field Research Corporation, and Director of The Field Poll, e-mail: markd@field.com

The election results in 2012 further strengthened California's national reputation as a Democratic stronghold. President Barack Obama carried the state by 23 percentage points, Dianne Feinstein was overwhelmingly re-elected to the US Senate, and Democrats secured two-thirds majority control of both houses of the state legislature, and won most of the congressional races targeted by the GOP. Voters approved also Proposition 30, a statewide tax increase initiative championed by Democratic Governor Jerry Brown and his allies as a means to balance the state budget.

The 2012 election outcomes were not unexpected. Obama carried California by a similar margin in 2008 and Democratic candidates have carried California

in each of the past four presidential elections by double-digit margins. With the exception of the election of celebrity politician Arnold Schwarzenegger, Democrats have won every statewide candidate election in California for the past 10 years.

My paper asserts that the biggest factor responsible for the Democratic Party's expanding political dominance relates to the growing turnout of ethnic voters coupled with their increasing preference for Democratic candidates and the more progressive policies they espouse.


While Obama's overall margin of victory in California in 2012 was no larger than it was in 2008, he increased his preference margins among ethnic voters while losing support among white non-Hispanics. According to exit polls, White non-Hispanics in California favored Republican Mitt Romney by eight points in 2012, a reversal from 4 years ago when they preferred Obama over John McCain by six points. At the same time, however, California Latinos increased their vote support for Obama to 45 points, while Asian Americans' favored Obama by 58 points. Factoring in his huge 93-point preference advantage among the state's relatively small share of Black voters, Obama's entire victory margin here was due to the growing turnout of ethnic voters and their very one-sided support for the President.

When I began polling California voters for *The Field Poll* in the late 1970s, the influence of the state's ethnic voters on election outcomes was considerably less. A turning point came in the 1994 general election, when voters approved a highly divisive illegal immigration ballot initiative, Proposition 187 (Prop. 187), which denied public services to undocumented residents. Although later thrown out by the courts as unconstitutional, the impact of the Prop. 187 campaign and the passage of two other statewide ballot measures supported by the state GOP in subsequent years, Proposition 209 ending race and gender-based affirmative action programs, and Proposition 227 eliminating bilingual education in the schools, proved to be long lasting for the state Republican Party. Ethnic voters, especially Latinos, turned increasingly away from the state GOP.

Following these elections, voter registration among the state's Latinos and Asian Americans began a rapid ascent, and their voting preferences became much more partisan in favor of the Democrats.

Figure 1 compares *Field Poll* estimates of the composition of the state's registered voters in 1994 to what it is today. It illustrates the dramatic growth in the number of registered Latino and Asian American voters in California since the passage of Prop. 187. At the time of its passage in 1994 the California Secretary of State reported that the state had 14.7 million registered voters. Today, there are slightly more than 18 million voters, a net increase of about 3.3 million. A comparison of the ethnic composition of the state electorate conducted by the *Field Poll* in each year shows that about three million of the 3.3 million increase, or more than 90% of it, has come from Latinos and Asian Americans.

	1994		2013		△
	in 000's	%	in 000's	%	
<b>Total registered voters</b>	<b>14,724</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>18,056</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>+3,332,000</b>
<b>White non-Hispanic</b>	<b>10,750</b>	<b>(73%)</b>	<b>10,850</b>	<b>(60%)</b>	<b>+100,000</b>
<b>Latino</b>	<b>2,200</b>	<b>(15%)</b>	<b>4,200</b>	<b>(23%)</b>	<b>+2,000,000</b>
<b>Asian American</b>	<b>750</b>	<b>(6%)</b>	<b>1,750</b>	<b>(10%)</b>	<b>+1,000,000</b>
<b>African American/Black</b>	<b>900</b>	<b>(5%)</b>	<b>1000</b>	<b>(6%)</b>	<b>+100,000</b>
<b>Other/Mixed</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>(1%)</b>	<b>256</b>	<b>(2%)</b>	<b>+132,000</b>



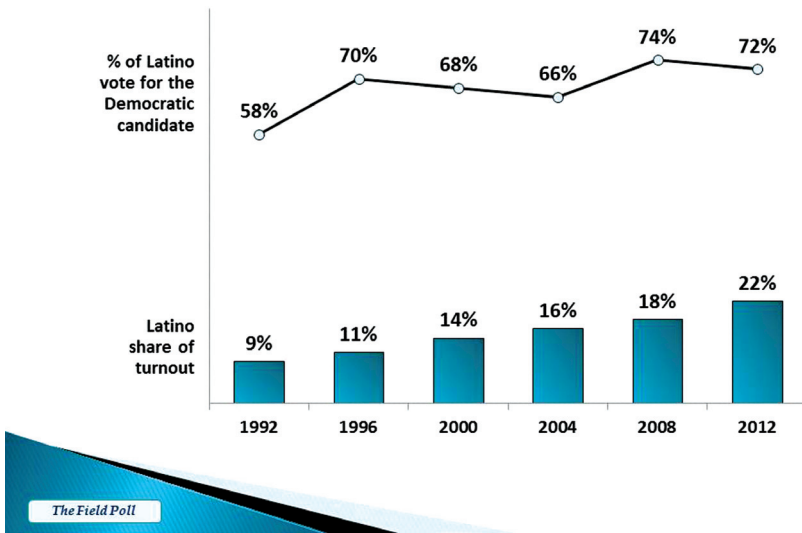
**Figure 1:** The Growth of Latino and Asian-American Voters on California’s Voter Registration Rolls (1994-present).

Source: Totals from the California Secretary of State Ethnic Subgroups are Field Poll Estimates.

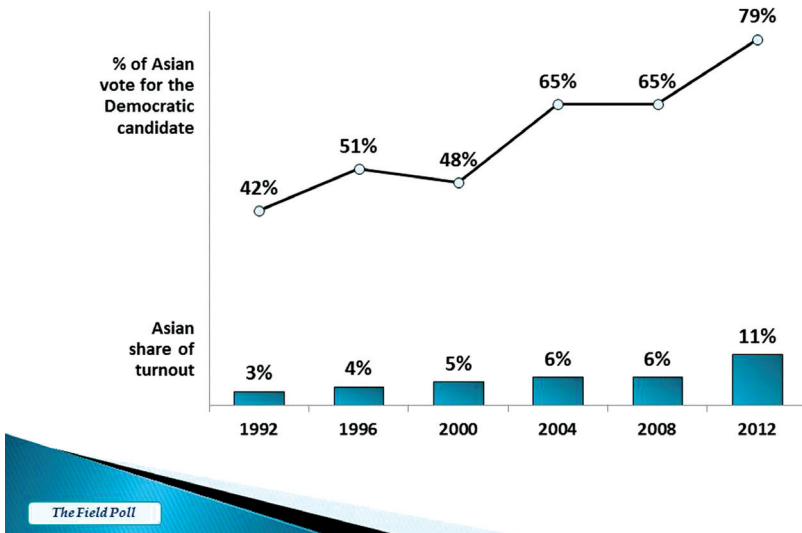
Over this period there has also been a pronounced shift in the voting preferences of state’s ethnic voters. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, it was not unusual for Republican candidates running for president or governor to win more than 40% of the state’s Latino and Asian-American voters. Ronald Reagan did it in his re-election victory for president in 1984, as did George Deukmejian in his re-election win for governor in 1986. Pete Wilson received similar levels of support among Latinos and Asian Americans in winning his first-term as governor in 1990.

However, as the Latino and Asian-American share of the voting electorate increased, each group has become much more aligned with the Democrats. It is no coincidence that during this period California changed from a very competitive “purple state” in presidential elections to one of the nation’s bluest of blue states. For example, in the 20 statewide elections for President, US Senate and Governor in California from 1974 to 1994, Republican candidates prevailed 11 times, while Democrats won nine. By contrast, in the 16 elections for these offices since then, Democratic candidates were elected 14 times. In addition, in the five presidential elections since 1996, Democratic candidates have carried the state by double-digit margins, and by more than 20 points in the last two.

Figure 2 shows that according to the exit polls, Latino voters increased their turnout share of the state’s voting electorate from 9% in 1992 to 22% in 2012. Over this period, the percentage of California Latinos casting ballots for the Democratic presidential nominee in these elections increased from 58% to 72%.



**Figure 2:** Latino Voting in California Presidential Elections (1992–2012).  
 Source: Exit Polls in California by Edison Media Research and its Predecessors and when Available Averaged with the California Exit Polls of the Los Angeles Times.



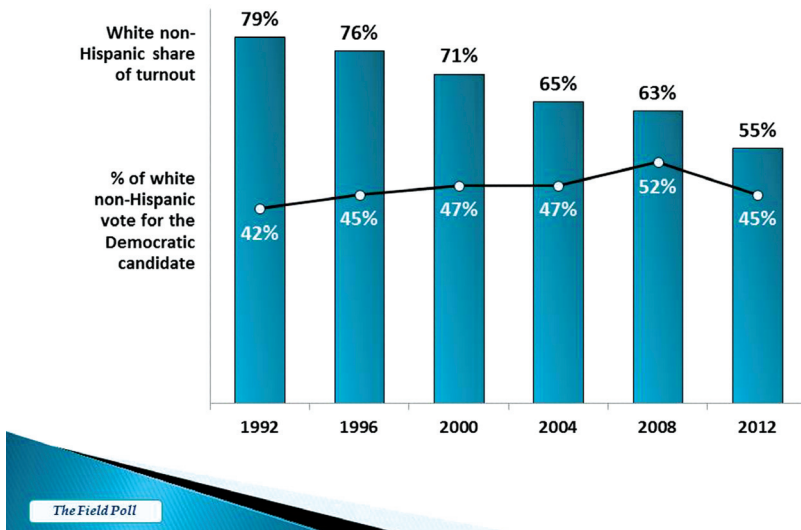
**Figure 3:** Asian American Voting in California Presidential Elections (1992–2012).  
 Source: Exit Polls in California by Edison Media Research and its Predecessors and when Available Averaged with the California Exit Polls of the Los Angeles Times.

Similarly, as Asian Americans increased their share of the vote from 3% in 1992 to 11% in 2012, their preferences for Democratic presidential candidates nearly doubled from 42% to 79% (Figure 3).

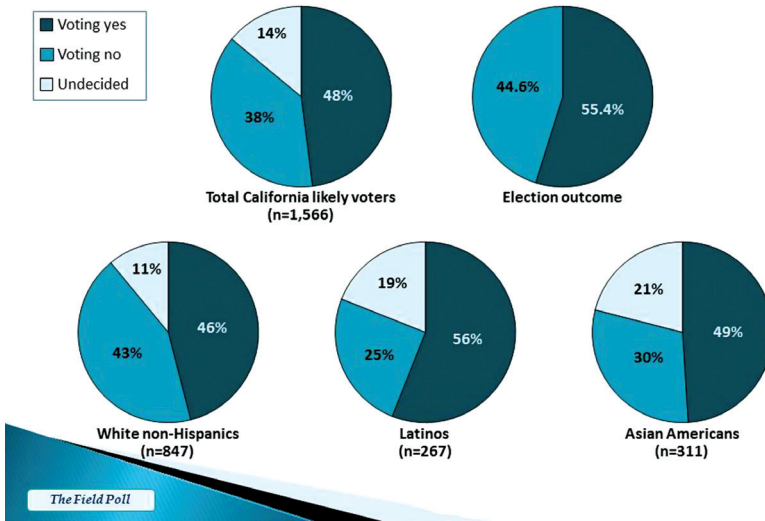
While this was occurring, the exit polls pegged the share of votes cast by the state’s White non-Hispanic voters as declining from 79% in 1992 to 55% in 2012 and noted no appreciable change in their voting preferences, with the Democratic candidate capturing 42% of the vote in 1992 and 45% in 2012 (Figure 4).

As the state’s ethnic voters have become an increasing force in electoral politics, *The Field Poll* has allocated more of its polling resources to examining the opinions and voting preferences of ethnic voters. Seven of 13 *Field Polls* conducted in the 2010 and 2012 election years were conducted not only in English and Spanish, but in four, and sometimes five, Asian languages and dialects. In many of these polls we augmented the number of interviews conducted among Asian-American voters to obtain a more accurate accounting of the views of this multifaceted voting segment.

A review of these polls and other recent polls comparing the views of White non-Hispanic voters to ethnic voters demonstrates that the opinions of ethnic voters increasingly align with Democratic policy positions in a number of key areas.



**Figure 4:** White non-Hispanic Voting in California Presidential Elections (1992–2012). Source: Exit Polls in California Edition Media Research and its Predecessors and when Available Averaged with the California Exit Polls of the Los Angeles Times.



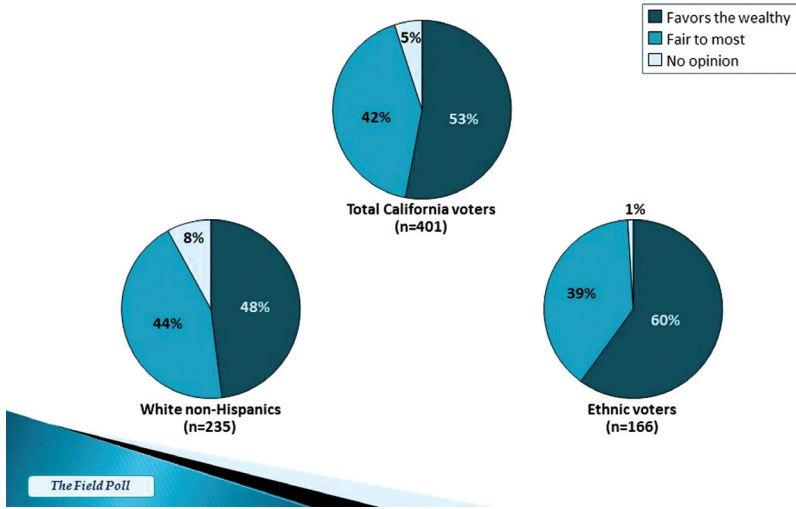
**Figure 5:** California Likely Voter Preferences Regarding Governor Jerry Brown's 2012 Tax Increase Initiative, Proposition 30.

Source: The Field Poll Based on a Telephone Survey of Likely Voters Conducted in Six Languages and Dialects in Late October 2012. Include Asia-American Oversample.

An example can be seen in the voting preferences of Latino and Asian Americans last year toward the Proposition 30 (Prop. 30) tax increase initiative that called for increasing the state income tax on those earning more than \$250,000 per year. As shown in Figure 5, the final pre-election Field Poll conducted in six languages in late October found that while White non-Hispanic voters were closely divided in their voting preferences, Latinos supported Prop. 30 by more than 30 points and Asian Americans backed it by nearly 20 points.

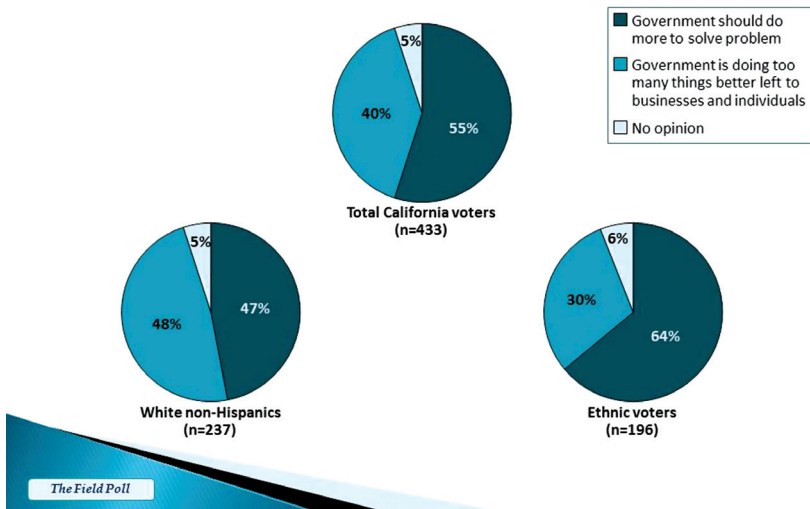
These results are reinforced by the findings of a network exit poll in California in 2012 that asked voters about the perceived fairness of the US economic system. According to the poll, White non-Hispanics were about evenly divided with 48% feeling it favors the wealthy and 44% feeling it was fair to most people. Ethnic voters were much more one-sided saying by a 60% to 39% margin that the US economic system favors the wealthy (Figure 6).

Another finding from the same exit poll reported major differences in voter perceptions of the role government should play in solving the nation's problems. White non-Hispanic voters were evenly divided on the issue with 47% saying that government should do more to solve nation's problems and 48% feeling it is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals. By contrast, ethnic voters supported government taking a more active role in solving the nation's problems by more than 1–2% (Figure 7).



**Figure 6:** California Exit Poll of Voters about the Fairness of the US Economic System – by Race/Ethnicity.

Source: Edison Media Research Exit Poll of California Voters in the November 5, 2012 Presidential Election.



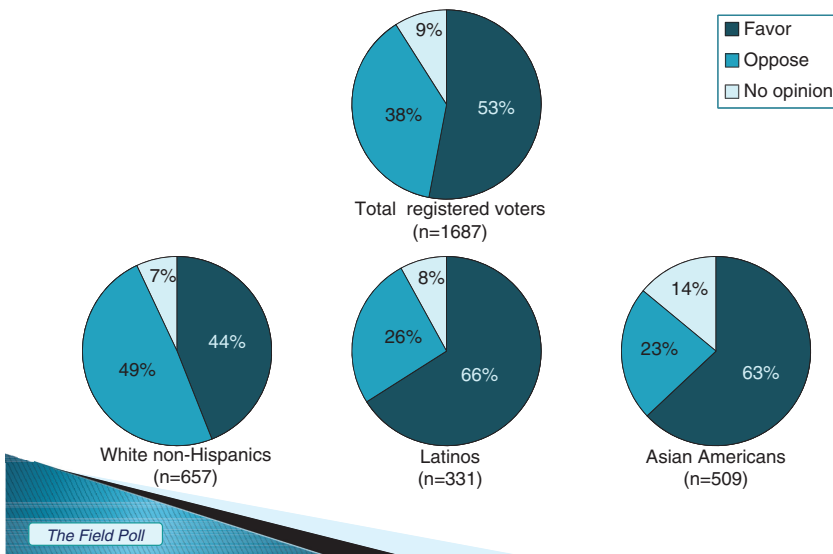
**Figure 7:** California Exit Poll of Voters about the Role of Government to Solve the Nation's Problems – by Race/Ethnicity.

Source: Edison Media Research Exit Poll of California Voters in the November 5, 2012 Presidential Election.



These differing views of the role of government in addressing the nation's problems are reflected in the differing views of White non-Hispanics and ethnic voters toward the Affordable Care Act. Since the law's passage in 2010, *The Field Poll* has conducted annual surveys assessing voter support for and opposition to the law. The polls have consistently shown double-digit support for the law by Latino and Asian American voters. As shown in Figure 8, the last survey, completed in the summer of 2013, California Latinos and Asian-Americans each backed the law by 40 points. Support among White non-Hispanics has never exceeded 46%, with the 2013 survey showing 44% in favor and 49% opposed.

As with Prop. 187, matters relating to the rights and privileges of the estimated 2.5 million undocumented residents in California have long divided the state's voters along ethnic lines. A February, 2013 Field Poll found huge differences between the views of White non-Hispanic and ethnic voters over whether the state's undocumented residents should be able to obtain a driver's license. The issue is extremely popular among ethnic voters, with 71% in favor and 24% opposed. White non-Hispanics oppose the proposal 55%–41%. In past years varying levels of ethnic voter support and opposition like these would have tilted overall voter preferences in the direction of the much larger White non-Hispanic voter bloc. Now, due to the growth of the state's ethnic voting population, these



**Figure 8:** California Registered Voter Views about the Affordable Care Act (July 2013). Source: Field Poll for the California Wellness Foundation, Conducted among California Registered Voters by Telephone in Seven Languages and Dialects. Includes Asian American Oversample.

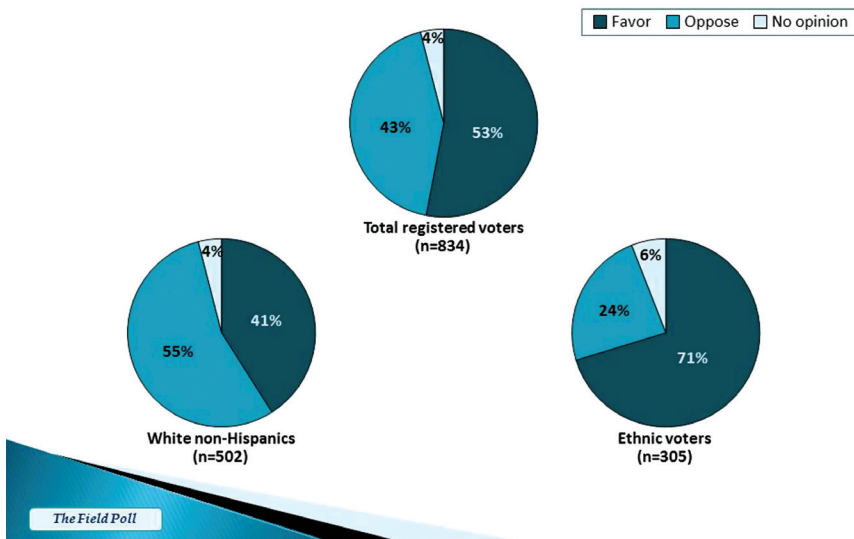
divisions translate to five-to-four majority support for the proposal among the overall electorate (Figure 9).

Similar results are seen on another major immigrant rights issue: whether undocumented students living in California should pay the same in-state tuition to attend California’s public universities as other residents. With white non-Hispanic voters about evenly split on the issue and ethnic voters favoring the policy nearly four to one, a February 2013 *Field Poll* found the overall electorate supporting the proposal by 24 points (Figure 10).

Findings from other *Field Polls* provide more clues as to why ethnic voters have been increasingly migrating to the Democratic candidates in recent elections and why this is likely to continue in the foreseeable future. One of the more interesting findings of recent *Field Polls* is the huge generational divide between the opinions of younger ethnic voters and their elders on some of the state’s hot button social issues.

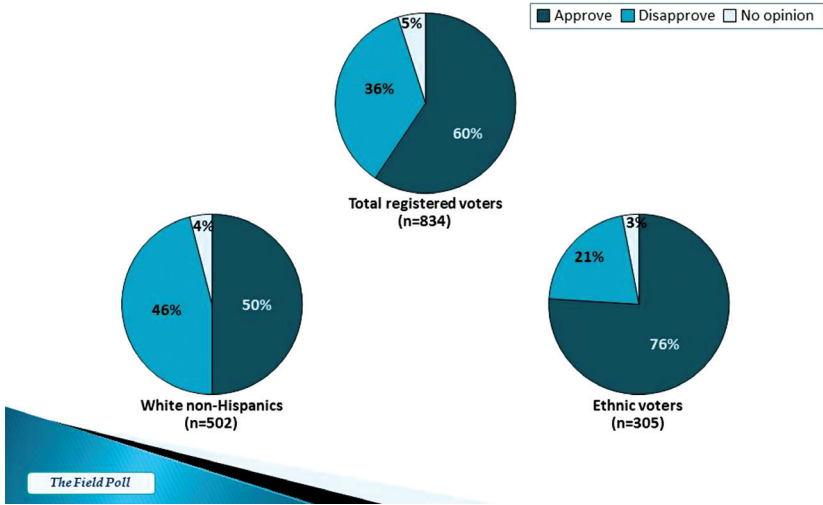
Figure 11 illustrates this phenomenon with regard to the issue of same-sex marriage. Recent *Field Polls* show that while ethnic voters over age 40 narrowly oppose allowing same sex couples to marry by 47%–42%, ethnic voters under age 40 are supportive by more than two and one-half to one (70%–27%).

A similar generational divide is seen within the ethnic voter community regarding legalizing the sale of marijuana. When ethnic voters are read a summary

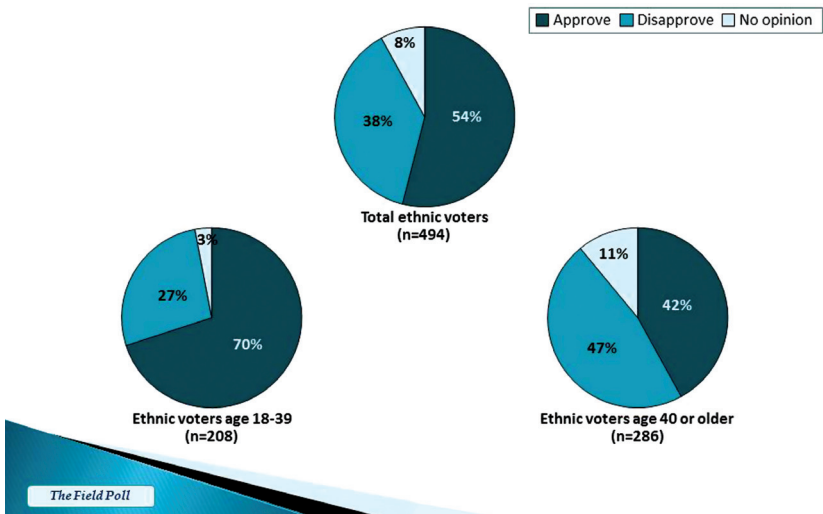


**Figure 9:** California Registered Voter Views about Allowing Undocumented Residents to Obtain a California Driver’s License (2013).

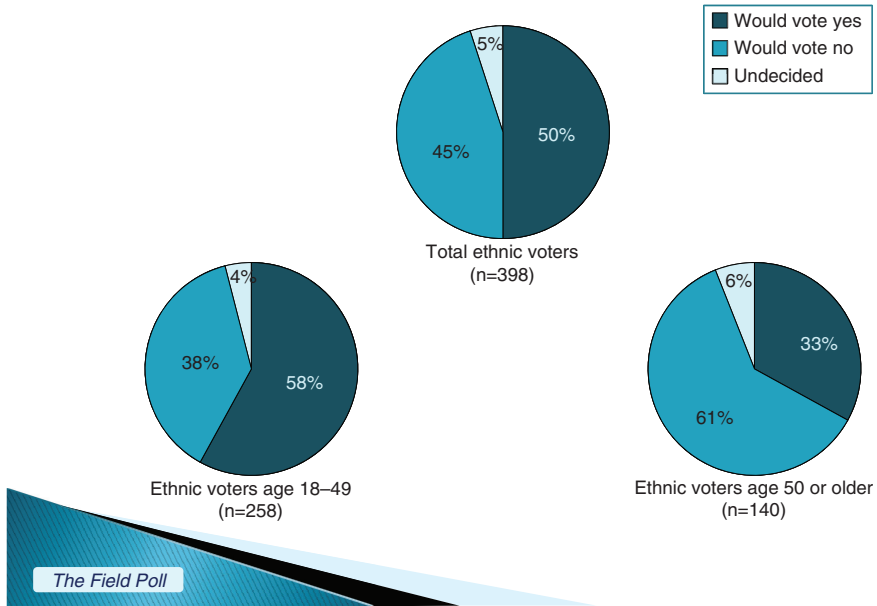
Source: The Field Poll Based on a Telephone Survey of California Registered Conducted in February 2013.



**Figure 10:** California Registered Voter Views about Allowing Undocumented Students to Pay the same in-state Tuition at California’s Public Universities as Other Students (2013). Source: The Field Poll Based a Telephone Survey of California Registered Conducted in February 2013.



**Figure 11:** California Ethnic Voter Opinions about Allowing Same-Sex Coules to Marry (2012/2013). Source: The Field Poll Based on the Average of two Telephone Survey of California Registered Voters Conducted in February 2013 and February 2012.



**Figure 12:** California Ethnic Voter Opinions about a Proposed Ballot Proposition to Legalize the Sale of Marijuana (December 2013).

Source: The Field Poll. Based on a Telephone Survey of California Registered Voters Conducted November 14–December 5, 2013.

of a proposed statewide ballot initiative to legalize the sale of marijuana, ethnic voters age 50 or older are opposed 61% to 33%, while younger ethnic voters back the initiative 58% to 38% (Figure 12).

I view these generation differences as a continuation of America’s long tradition of being a social melting pot with the views and policy positions of the sons and daughters of immigrants falling more in line with those of their White non-Hispanic peers than their parents.

These findings have significant long-term political implications, since ethnic voters have traditionally been thought of as being a somewhat more conservative constituency on major social issues than other Democratic voting blocs. These recent poll findings indicate that opinions of the state’s ethnic voters are changing on these issues, with most of the change occurring among younger ethnic voters. This undercuts the long-held notion that on major social issues, the ethnic voters are more likely to be in sync with the traditional values and beliefs of the GOP than the Democratic Party.

All of this bodes ill for the long-term electoral fortunes of the Republican Party in the state, since the demographic changes now unfolding within the California electorate will likely continue. While ethnic voters’ share of

California's registered voter population has grown considerably over the past 20 years, it is still nowhere near the greater than 60% majority share they comprise of the state's total adult population. We should therefore expect this growth to continue into the foreseeable future.

Thus, as the proportion of voters in California who are registered as Republicans dips to a modern era low of just 29%, and we witness an election in which the Republican presidential candidate is preferred among the state's white non-Hispanic voters by eight points, but loses the election by twenty-three points, it's probably time for the California Republican Party and the rest of the state's political establishment to listen more attentively to the views and opinions of the state's fast-growing ethnic voter population.