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Voters favor term limits for local county supervisors, district attorneys, and sheriffs

The latest *Berkeley IGS Poll* conducted on behalf of the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund among 5,095 California registered voters in early June explored a number of proposals aimed at reforming local governance. Below are its key findings.

Currently, term limit laws do not normally apply to many local elected offices, including county supervisors, district attorneys, and sheriffs. The poll finds strong bipartisan support to change this, with about three quarters of voters statewide in favor of setting term limits for county supervisors (77%), district attorneys (77%), and county sheriffs (73%). The poll finds majority consensus among voters that two terms (8 years) is the preferred limit that should apply to each office.

Two in three voters also support a requirement for the top two finishers in primary elections for county supervisors, district attorney, and sheriff to compete against one another in the general election. Currently candidates for these posts who receive a majority in a primary election win the election outright and do not have to compete again in the general election. According to California Common Cause, in the 2022 election cycle, of the 129 contests for county supervisor, 80 winners (62%) were elected in the June primary. For district attorney, of the 57 contests, 53 winners (93%) were also elected in the June primary.

"California's current approach to county primary elections results in incumbent supervisors, district attorneys and sheriffs consistently winning reelection in low turnout primary elections and never having to face larger, more diverse general electorates. It also keeps low-profile county offices that are critically important permanently under the public radar," said Jonathan Mehta Stein, Executive Director of California Common Cause. "Evidently, Californians want county elections to be run in a way that will result in more representative electorates and representative electeds."

In addition, a plurality of California voters (47%) think it would be better to hold elections for local offices at the same time as presidential elections which typically draw a higher turnout, even if this results in more issues to vote on in these elections. This far exceeds the 27% of voters who prefer holding local elections at the same time as gubernatorial elections.

Three in four voters (74%) maintain that it is important for their local elected officials to reflect the diversity of their community. Furthermore, voters' opinion of how well their leaders reflect the diversity of their communities are correlated with assessments of the degree to which those leaders represent voters' political values. Of those who feel their local elected officials reflect the diversity of their community "very well," 77% maintain that their leaders also represent their own political values well. On the other hand, of those who feel their local elected officials reflect the diversity of

their community "not at all well," nearly all (91%) believe that their leaders also do not represent their own political values well.

IGS Co-Director G. Cristina Mora notes, "the results reflect some of the frustrations held by California voters of color and advocacy groups who contend that elected officials do not reflect the racial diversity found across the Golden State. For example, even though over forty percent of the state is Latino, this community is drastically underrepresented in elected offices across local, regional, and state levels."

Bipartisan support for applying term limit laws to local county supervisors, district attorneys, and sheriffs

Currently, term limit laws in California do not apply to many local elected offices, including county supervisors, district attorneys, and sheriffs.

According to the poll, large majorities of voters favor changing this so that term limits also apply to county supervisors (77%), district attorneys (77%), and county sheriffs (73%). Support for term limits for these offices spans across political party lines, with large majorities of Democrats, Republicans, and non-partisans all in favor of such limits.

Among voters in favor of term limits for local offices, three in four say they favor 2 terms (8 years) as a maximum length. Views on this issue do not vary much among the state's Democrats, Republicans, and non-partisans.

Table 1

Voter support for applying term limits to county supervisors, district attorneys, and sheriffs, and the preferred length of the term limit *(among California registered voters)*

				If favor: Preferred length of term limits			
	Favor %	**Oppose %**	**No opinion %**	**2 terms (8 yrs.) %**	**3 terms (12 yrs.) %**	**4 terms (16 yrs.) %**	**No opinion %**
County Supervisors							
Total registered voters	**77**	**11**	**12**	**75**	**16**	**2**	**7**
Democrats	76	12	12	71	19	3	7
Republicans	80	10	10	84	10	2	5
No Party Preference/other	76	10	14	74	16	2	8
District Attorneys							
Total registered voters	**77**	**11**	**11**	**74**	**16**	**3**	**7**
Democrats	77	12	12	70	20	4	6
Republicans	80	12	8	81	10	3	5
No Party Preference/other	76	11	13	74	15	3	7
Sheriffs							
Total registered voters	**73**	**15**	**12**	**73**	**17**	**4**	**6**
Democrats	77	11	12	72	18	3	7
Republicans	69	22	9	76	15	5	5
No Party Preference/other	71	15	14	72	16	5	7

Voters also support requiring run-off elections for these same local offices even if one of the candidates receives a majority of the primary election vote

In most California counties, when a candidate for county supervisor, district attorney, or sheriff receives a majority of the votes in a primary election, that person wins election outright and does not have to compete again in the general election. The poll finds that 65% of voters favor changing this so that the top two finishers in the primary elections for these offices should be required to compete against one another in the general election even when one receives a majority of the primary vote.

For each of the three offices, about four times as many voters consistently favor making this change. In the case of county supervisors 65% are in favor, while 14% are opposed; the comparable figures for both district attorney and sheriff are 64% in favor of run-off elections and 16% opposed.

"Many of the current leadership do not always reflect the rich diversity and political beliefs of their communities, especially in places like California's Central Valley. This underscores the urgent need for elections that authentically represent the people they serve. November elections typically have a significant turnout and garner nationwide attention, providing a more inclusive opportunity compared to primary elections," said Destiny Rodriquez, Executive Director for MOVE the Valley.

Table 2

Voter support for changing local election laws to require top two finishers in primary elections to compete in the general election, even if a candidate receives a majority of the votes in the primary *(among California registered voters)*

	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
	%	%	%
County Supervisors			
Total registered voters	**65**	**14**	**21**
Democrats	66	13	19
Republicans	61	21	19
No Party Preference/others	65	12	24
District Attorneys			
Total registered voters	**64**	**16**	**20**
Democrats	66	15	19
Republicans	62	20	18
No Party Preference/others	63	14	23
Sheriffs			
Total registered voters	**64**	**16**	**20**
Democrats	66	14	19
Republicans	60	22	19
No Party Preference/others	63	14	23

Voters believe it is important for local elected officials to reflect the diversity of their communities

Three in four voters (74%) believe it is important for their local elected officials to reflect the diversity of their community, with 49% saying this is very important and 25% describing it as somewhat important. Just 23% of the state's voters do not feel this is important.

Larger proportions of the state's voters of color feel it is very important for their local elected officials to reflect the diversity of their community compared to white voters. This includes 67% of

Black voters, 57% of Latino voters, and 54% of Asian American or Pacific Islander voters. By comparison, among white voters 41% consider this very important.

"People deserve to see themselves and their values reflected in their local elected officials. When leaders mirror the diversity of their communities, it fosters trust and a sense of equitable representation," said Angélica Salceda, director of the ACLU of Northern California's Democracy and Civic Engagement Program.

Table 3

How important is it for local elected officials to reflect the diversity of your community?
(among California registered voters)

	Very important %	Somewhat important %	Not important %	No opinion %
Total statewide	**49**	**25**	**23**	**3**
Race/ethnicity				
White	41	29	28	3
Latino	57	17	21	4
Black/African American	67	21	9	3
Asian American/Pacific Islander *(net)*	54	30	14	2
Chinese American	48	37	13	2
Vietnamese American	62	22	14	2
Korean American	53	36	7	4
Other AAPI	56	27	15	2

Voter evaluations of how current local leaders reflect their political values is strongly tied to how well they reflect the diversity of their community

Voters were also asked to assess how well their current local elected officials reflect the diversity of their community and how well their leaders represented voters' own political values. In response, 51% say current local leaders reflect the diversity of their community either very well or somewhat well, while slightly fewer (45%) say their current local leaders represent voters' political values well.

Responses to these questions showed a strong correlation between voters' understanding of how well local leaders reflect the diversity of their community and how well they reflect voters' political values. Of those who feel their local elected officials reflect the diversity of their community "very well," 77% maintain their leaders also represent their own political values well. On the other hand, of those who feel their local elected officials reflect the diversity of their community "not at all well," nearly all (91%) believe that their leaders also do not represent their own political values well.

Table 4

Relationship between how well voters feel their local elected officials reflect the diversity of their community and how well they represent voters' own political values

(among California registered voters)

		How well do your local elected officials reflect the diversity of your community?				
	Total Registered voters %	**Very well** %	**Somewhat well** %	**Not too well %**	**Not at all well %**	**No opinion %**
How well do your local elected officials represent your own political values?						
Very well	**7**	37	5	1	1	2
Somewhat well	**38**	40	60	26	4	19
Not too well	**26**	13	21	46	22	21
Not at all well	**20**	7	9	23	69	26
No opinion	**10**	3	5	4	4	33

Voters believe it is more important for their elected officials to reflect their political values than their gender, race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation by a wide margin (80% to 9%). While large majorities across all voter subgroups hold to this view, some groups report higher shares saying it was more important for local elected officials to reflect their gender, race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation, including 21% of Black voters, 26% of Vietnamese voters, 24% of Korean voters and 28% who complete the survey in an Asian language. This compares to just 5% of white voters and 4% of Republicans.

When would be a better time to hold elections for local offices?

Voters were also asked when a better time would be to hold elections for local offices in their community -- at the same time as presidential elections, which typically draw a higher turnout even if this means there are more issues to vote on, or at the same time as gubernatorial elections. In this setting, more voters (47%) favor holding their local elections at the same time as presidential elections, while 27% prefer holding them at the same time as gubernatorial elections. Another 26% have no opinion.

Opinions about this do not vary much across voter subgroups.

Table 5

When would be a better time to elect local offices in your community – when presidential elections are held, which typically draw a high turnout but may increase the number of election contests to vote on, or when gubernatorial elections are held?
(among California registered voters)

	When presidential elections are held	When gubernatorial elections are held	No opinion
	%	%	%
Total statewide	**47**	**27**	**26**
Party registration			
Democrats	48	26	26
Republicans	49	29	21
No Party Preference/others	42	28	31
Race/ethnicity			
White	48	26	26
Latino	42	31	27
Black/African American	47	23	30
Asian American/Pacific Islander *(net)*	50	25	25
Chinese American	49	23	28
Vietnamese American	46	25	29
Korean American	57	23	20
Other AAPI	50	27	22

About the survey

The findings in this report are based on a *Berkeley IGS Poll* completed by the Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS) at the University of California, Berkeley on behalf of the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund. The poll was administered online from May 29 to June 4, 2024, in five languages: English, Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean. A total of 5,095 California registered voters were included in the poll.

The poll was conducted by distributing email invitations to stratified random samples of the state's registered voters. Each email invited voters to participate in a non-partisan survey conducted by the University and provided voters with a link to the IGS website where the survey was housed. To accommodate non-English language voters, voters whose voting record indicated that they preferred to have their voting materials sent to them in a Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese or Korean were sent their email invitations in-language asking them to choose which language they preferred to complete the survey. Reminder emails were distributed to non-responding voters and an opt out link was provided for voters not wishing to receive further email invitations. Voter email addresses were derived from public information contained on the state's voter registration rolls and were provided to IGS by Political Data, Inc., a leading supplier of registered voter lists in California.

To protect the anonymity of respondents, each voter's email address and all other personally identifiable information included on their voting record were purged from the data file and replaced with an anonymous identification number during data processing. After the completion of data collection, post-stratification weights were applied to align the sample to population characteristics of the overall registered vote statewide, and where possible, within each of the state's major regions. The sampling error associated with the survey results is difficult to calculate precisely because of

sample stratification and weighting. Nevertheless, it is likely that findings based on the overall sample of registered voters are subject to a sampling error of approximately +/-2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

Question wording

California has people of many different ethnicities, religions, races, and lifestyles. How important is it for your local elected officials to reflect the diversity of your community?

How well do you feel your local elected officials (reflect the diversity of your community) (represent your political values)?

Is it more important to you that your local elected officials reflect your gender, race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation or more important to reflect your political values?

In recent years some local jurisdictions have shifted the dates when local offices are elected so that they coincide with when presidential elections are held, rather than when gubernatorial elections are held. This tends to increase the number of voters participating since turnout is typically greater in presidential election years. However, this also increases the number of races and issues that voters are asked to vote on in presidential election years and may result in less attention being given to local races. Given these tradeoffs, when do you think is the better time to elect local offices in your community?

Do you favor or oppose limiting the number of terms that each of these local elected officials are allowed to serve? (1) District Attorney, (2) Sheriff, (3) County Supervisor? **(IF FAVOR)** For how many years in total should these local elected officials be allowed to serve?

In most counties, when a candidate for district attorney, sheriff, or county supervisor receives a majority of the votes in a primary election, he or she wins the election outright and does not have to compete again in the general election when more voters are likely to be participating. Do you favor or oppose changing this so that the top two finishers in the primary election for each of these local offices must compete against each other in the general election?

About the Institute of Governmental Studies

The Institute of Governmental studies (IGS) is an interdisciplinary organized research unit that pursues a vigorous program of research, education, publication and public service. A component of the University of California system's flagship Berkeley campus, IGS is the oldest organized research unit in the UC system and the oldest public policy research center in the state. IGS's co-directors are Professor Eric Schickler and Associate Professor G. Cristina Mora.

IGS conducts periodic surveys of California public opinion in California on matters of politics and public policy through its *Berkeley IGS Poll.* The poll seeks to provide broad measures of contemporary public opinion and generate data for scholarly analysis. Veteran pollster Mark DiCamillo serves as director of the poll. For a complete listing of reports issued by the poll, please visit https://www.igs.berkeley.edu/research/berkeley-igs-poll.

About the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund

The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund works to advance equality and justice so every person can thrive and live life with dignity and hope. Rooted in the Bay Area, it focuses on a set of issues that include building a fairer, more representative democracy in California; advancing more humane approaches to immigration and expanding opportunities for immigrant youth and families; and making higher education more affordable for lower-income California students. It has awarded over $695 million in grants since its founding in 1953.