

DO ABSENTEE VOTERS DIFFER FROM POLLING PLACE VOTERS?

NEW EVIDENCE FROM CALIFORNIA

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Abstract In the 2003 California gubernatorial recall election 2,775,785 absentee ballots were cast, representing about 30 percent of all voters statewide. Given the number of absentee ballots and the increasing propensity for voters in California and elsewhere to choose this voting method, we some basic questions: Who are absentee voters, and are they different from polling place voters? To answer these questions, we fielded a statewide survey of absentee voters in the days before the October 7 recall election, asking respondents why they voted absentee, their partisan and ideological preferences, demographic characteristics, and other relevant questions. We find that absentee voters do not differ significantly from the overall state electorate in terms of their vote preferences, despite being older and better educated. For example, 56 percent of absentee voters in our survey voted “yes” on the recall, compared with 55 percent for the entire state, according to official returns. Further, absentee voters favored Arnold Schwarzenegger over Cruz Bustamante by a considerable margin, similar to the overall election

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results. We found party registration among absentee voters to be nearly identical to statewide partisan registration.

Introduction

In the days leading up to the historic 2003 gubernatorial recall election in California, election officials predicted “presidential-level turnout” for the special election. If the election were close, officials warned, the outcome could remain in doubt for weeks while absentee ballots were tabulated (Kershaw 2003). According to the secretary of state at the time, Kevin Shelly, “it could take as long as 39 days to certify what could be a very close election, especially with the large number of absentee ballots” (Michels 2003). Conventional wisdom a month before the election held that absentee voters indeed held the key to the election, and they were being pursued aggressively (Simon 2003). Adding fuel to the fire, Shelly openly encouraged voters to use the absentee ballot amid worries that polling places would be overcrowded. “Given the fact that this election takes place at a time when nobody is used to voting, when many of the precincts are being consolidated and the potential for long lines at the polls, . . . it’s in everyone’s interest to become an absentee voter,” said Shelly (Simon 2003).

While the results on Election Night were not as close as some expected, more than 2.75 million people cast absentee votes, a record until 2004 (see table 1). This turnout leads to the question: Who were these voters? Our analysis of the election’s absentee voters reveals that their preferences paralleled those of polling place voters. This finding suggests that absentee voting may not favor particular parties, candidates, or causes over others, at least in high salience elections such as the California recall.

Table 1. Absentee Voters in California Elections, 1976–2004

Year	Total Voters	Absentee Voters	% Absentee
1976	8,137,202	366,535	4.5%
1980	8,775,459	549,007	6.3%
1984	9,796,375	913,574	9.3%
1988	10,194,539	1,434,853	14.1%
1992	11,374,184	1,950,179	17.2%
1996	10,263,490	2,078,065	20.3%
2000	11,142,843	2,732,947	24.5%
2003	9,413,494	2,775,785	29.5%
2004	12,589,683	4,105,179	32.6%

SOURCE.—California secretary of state, 2004; available online at http://www.ss.ca.gov/elections/hist_absentee.htm (accessed April 3, 2006).

Groups that tend to support Republican candidates and conservative causes, including traveling businesspeople and those serving in the military, may have good reason to request absentee ballots. Indeed, the absentee vote in Florida, before the state changed its absentee laws in 2001, traditionally favored Republicans by more than 20 percent (Frankovic 2004). However, as a number of states have eliminated restrictive rules for voting absentee, there is reason to believe that absentee voters may come more to resemble polling place voters. Our statewide survey of absentee voters in the days before the 2003 California recall election asked respondents how they voted in the election, why they voted absentee, their partisan and ideological preferences, and demographic characteristics. Combining our absentee data in the 2003 recall election with exit poll data conducted by the *Los Angeles Times*, we find that, indeed, absentee voters were remarkably similar to the state electorate as a whole, both in terms of their demographic characteristics and in terms of their vote choices.

This research note proceeds as follows. First, we briefly examine the relatively limited literature regarding absentee voting. Second, we describe our survey of absentee voters and the methodology employed in this analysis. Finally, we analyze the findings and conclude with a discussion of the implications of our study.

Differences between Election Day and Absentee Voters

There are very few systematic studies of absentee voters. Among those that exist, some have found absentee voters slightly more likely to reside in areas where Republican registration runs high (Mueller 1969, p. 1203; Patterson and Caldeira 1985) or among demographic groups more likely to vote Republican, including voters from rural or suburban areas and higher-income voters (Harris 1934, pp. 293–301; Merriam and Gosnell 1924, pp. 63–77; Oliver 1996; Pollock 1939). In the late 1980s the California Opinion Index profiled absentee voters as more likely than precinct voters to be older, male, more politically conservative, and more likely to favor Republican candidates (Newton 1989). Other investigations, however, detected no partisan advantage among absentee voters (Dubin and Kalsow 1996; Karp and Banducci 2001). Therefore, the picture of how the partisan affiliation of absentee voters differs from Election Day polling place voters is unclear.

Other attributes, however, have more clearly distinguished absentee voters from Election Day voters. Karp and Banducci discovered that politically active people are more likely to vote by absentee ballot (2001) and that all-mail voting tends to favor people with higher socioeconomic status (2000). Stein (1998) found that early voters have a greater interest in politics, identify more strongly with a political party, and possess a stronger ideological attachment than Election Day voters. Likewise, in their survey of prospective voters in Knox County, Tennessee, Neeley and Richardson (2001) detected no socioeconomic differences

between early voters and Election Day voters but a lower likelihood of voting early among those voters with low political efficacy, little interest in the campaign, and no strong partisan attachment. In short, some studies have found absentee and early voters to be more ideological and more interested in politics.

There also seems to be an emerging consensus regarding the demographic traits of absentee voters compared with Election Day precinct voters. The few studies that have examined these issues found absentee voting positively associated with higher educational attainment (Dubin and Kalsow 1996; Karp and Banducci 2001; Oliver 1996; Patterson and Caldeira 1985) and higher income (Oliver 1996; Patterson and Caldeira 1985) and negatively associated with higher percentages of African American registration (Dubin and Kalsow 1996; Oliver 1996).¹ Moreover, if absentee voting is intended to help people who might have difficulty casting a ballot at a polling place, it should come as little surprise that absentee voting appears to be associated with older people (Dubin and Kalsow 1996; Karp and Banducci 2001; Karp and Karp 1999; Oliver 1996; Patterson and Caldeira 1985), students (Karp and Banducci 2001; Oliver 1996), the disabled (Karp and Banducci 2001), renters (Dubin and Kalsow 1996; Oliver 1996), and people with young children (Dubin and Kalsow 1996), and it appears to be negatively associated with areas of high unemployment (Dubin and Kalsow 1996).

Data and Methodology

To assess whether absentee voters in California differ from Election Day voters, we compared survey results from the California Absentee Voter Survey (CAVS) to a *Los Angeles Times* exit poll for the 2003 recall election. The CAVS was conducted by telephone by the Center for the Study of Los Angeles at Loyola Marymount University three days prior to the October 7, 2003, election. The poll of 300 absentee voters statewide, who had already completed their absentee ballot, has a margin of sampling error of ± 5 percent and a response rate of 24 percent.² The Center for the Study of Los Angeles purchased a statewide database of registered voters from the California secretary of state's office, including the names and telephone numbers of current registered voters in California, and used the voter list to draw a random sample. In order to capture first-time absentee voters, all registered voters in the state were given an equal probability to be included in the study, as opposed to only surveying voters "flagged" as absentee voters by the statewide database. The telephone survey was implemented by Interviewing Service of America (ISA)

1. However, Dubin and Kalsow (1996) find a negative association between absentee voting and counties with more highly educated populations.

2. The response rate was calculated using response rate 1, as defined by American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR 2000) guidelines, excluding noneligible respondents. In addition, the overall contact rate 1 was 48 percent, and the cooperation rate 1 following the screening questions to determine absentee status was 88 percent.

in Van Nuys, California. A simple screening question was used to identify self-reported absentee voters: "For the upcoming October 7 recall election, have you already voted using an absentee ballot?" (See the appendix for the full wording of all questions used in this study.)

The *Los Angeles Times* exit poll, a self-administered questionnaire for 5,200 voters in 74 polling locations statewide, carries a margin of error of ± 2 percent. The *Times* poll covered only Election Day voters. While some exit polls have started taking account of absentee voters, the 2003 *Times* poll did not interview absentee voters, who accounted for about 3 in 10 California voters.³ To include the preferences of absentee voters, the *Times* weighted its data after all the votes were tallied so that the poll's results closely matched the statewide vote totals.⁴ However, the *Times*'s raw data set only includes interviews with Election Day voters, providing for an optimal comparison with the CAVS poll of absentee voters. Taken together, these surveys represent the first effort that we are aware of to assess the electoral outcome, taking account of the full electorate of polling place and absentee voters, using many of the same political and demographic questions.

In comparing absentee and polling place voters we present side-by-side frequency results for each survey on two important categories: voter demographics and political preferences. We tabulate the characteristics of each group of voters for five demographic variables: race, age, gender, education, and income. Next, to gauge political preference, we examine the three main issues voters were asked to decide in the October 2003 special election, as well as party affiliation. Our three vote preference dependent variables include (1) yes or no on the recall of Governor Gray Davis, (2) preference for Arnold Schwarzenegger, Cruz Bustamante, Tom McClintock, or Peter Camejo as replacement governor,⁵ and (3) yes or no on Proposition 54, which would have prohibited state and local governments from classifying any person by race, ethnicity, color, or national origin. Finally, we compare the party affiliation rates (Democrat, Republican, or Independent/Other) of absentee voters to statewide party registration.

Results

We are interested in two questions: (1) Do absentee differ demographically from Election Day voters, and (2) Do they have different political preferences? To get an initial sense of the absentee electorate and the popularity of this voting

3. The *Los Angeles Times* did conduct preelection surveys, but the sample included all California registered voters, and the surveys did not ask voters their intention of voting absentee or in person. To our knowledge, the CAVS was the only survey conducted of absentee voters during the 2003 recall election.

4. More information on the *Los Angeles Times* exit poll is available online at <http://www.latimes.com/timespoll> (accessed April 3, 2006).

5. While there were more than 100 candidates running for governor in 2003, these four candidates received more than 95 percent of the vote and therefore are the main focus of analysis in this study.

method, we first assess why people vote absentee, as well as the proportion who consistently use this technique. As table 2 shows, absentee voters in our survey reported their biggest motivation for using the absentee ballot is simply the ease and convenience that it provides (37 percent). Next, voters indicated that they preferred the absentee ballot because of handicap or difficulty getting around to and from the polling precinct (15 percent). Although the Americans with Disability Act requires that polling places be handicapped-accessible, many elderly and disabled voters indicated that they would still have trouble driving to the precinct, getting inside, and navigating the voting booth. These factors contribute to the finding that absentee voters are more likely to be older than precinct voters. Voters who said they are just too busy to go to the polls on Election Day were the third most likely category of absentee voters (11 percent), followed by people who were traveling out of town during the election (8 percent). Interestingly, a number of voters (8 percent) used absentee ballots because they viewed their polling place as inconvenient, difficult to find, or out of the way (Barreto, Marks, and Woods 2004). Taken together, the data summarized in table 2 indicate that the bulk of absentee voters reported that they prefer to vote early because it is easier and more convenient than voting at the polls on Election Day. This preference does not on its own suggest a reason to expect a particular partisan bias among the absentee electorate, although it might explain some other demographic differences between absentee and Election Day voters, such as age.

The next question to be addressed is how many of the large number of absentee voters in the 2003 contest were new to this method of voting. To ascertain this information, we asked respondents to report the number of times they had voted absentee prior to the 2003 election. While a majority (57.3 percent)

Table 2. Reasons Given for Absentee Voting in 2003 California Recall Election

Reason	Percentage
Ease/Convenience	37%
Hard to get around/Handicap	15%
Too busy	11%
Traveling	8%
Precinct not convenient	8%
I always vote absentee	7%
To get it over with	4%
Received ballot in mail	2%
Other	7%

SOURCE.—California Absentee Voter Survey, 2003 (Loyola Marymount University 2003).

NOTE.— $N = 300$.

Table 3. Partisanship Comparison of Absentee Voters and Statewide Registered Voters

Party	Absentee	Statewide	Difference
Democrat	42.0%	43.7%	-1.7
Republican	37.7%	35.3%	2.4
Independent/Other	20.3%	21.0%	-0.7

SOURCE.—For absentee voters, CAVS; for statewide registration, California secretary of state.
NOTE.—N = 300.

were “consistent” absentee voters, having voted via absentee ballot four times or more, a considerable number cast absentee ballots for the first (10.6 percent) or second time (9.6 percent) during the recall election.⁶

In sum, the analysis thus far reveals an absentee electorate that is growing and heterogeneous in terms of experience and reason for voting absentee, suggesting no specific partisan bias. To further investigate the differences in the composition of the absentee and polling place electorate, we compare party registration rates among absentee voters and the state as a whole (table 3). There is no significant difference between the party registration of absentee voters and the party registration of the state as a whole. Republicans account for 35.3 percent of all registered citizens statewide, and they comprised 37.7 percent of absentee voters in the CAVS. The difference of 2.4 points is well within the margin of error. Likewise, there are no significant differences between the percentages of Democratic and independent absentee voters and their statewide registration totals.

Although the partisanship of absentee voters mirrors that of statewide party registration, are absentee voters different from Election Day voters on other demographic characteristics? Table 4 presents side-by-side results for the basic demographic and political characteristics of absentee and polling place voters, derived from the CAVS and the *Los Angeles Times* exit polls.⁷ Racially, absentee voters are quite similar to those who voted at precincts, with the differences being inside the margin of error.⁸ Although women were slightly more likely to be represented in the absentee group of voters, this difference

6. The full results for previous use of absentee ballot were as follows: 10.6 percent of respondents reported it was their first election to vote absentee, 9.6 percent had voted absentee once before, 12 percent twice before, 9.9 percent three times before, 6.8 percent four times before, and 50.5 percent more than four times before.

7. For the *Los Angeles Times* exit poll we used the traditional weighting scheme as employed by the *Times* in reporting frequency results. The absentee survey is demographically and geographically representative, and no weights were needed. In separate regression analysis conducted by the authors, absentee voters were weighted to represent 30 percent of the electorate, as reported by the secretary of state’s office.

8. Respondents in the absentee voter survey were somewhat less likely to report their race or ethnicity than were the respondents in the exit poll, a self-administered questionnaire where the respondent had more privacy. Still, the racial composition of the two groups of voters is consistent.

Table 4. Demographic and Vote Comparison of Absentee and Election Day Voters

	Absentee	Election Day	Difference
White	70.7%	73.6%	-2.9
Latino	10.3%	11.8%	-1.5
Black	4.4%	5.4%	-1.0
Asian	3.7%	5.8%	-2.1
Female	56.0%	50.9%	5.1
Under 40 years old	15.6%	29.9%	-14.3*
41-59 years old	42.6%	44.2%	-1.6
Over 60 years old	41.8%	25.9%	15.9*
College degree	77.7%	59.3%	18.4*
Under \$60,000	55.1%	38.0%	17.1*
Over \$100,000	19.7%	29.9%	-10.2*
Recall—Yes	56.0%	55.5%	0.5
Recall—No	44.0%	44.5%	-0.5
Schwarzenegger	46.6%	49.0%	-2.4
Bustamante	33.2%	32.0%	1.2
McClintock	13.5%	13.0%	0.5
Camejo	3.6%	3.0%	0.6
Other	3.1%	3.0%	0.1
Prop. 54—Yes	30.8%	36.1%	-5.3
Prop. 54—No	69.2%	63.9%	5.3
<i>N</i>	300	5,205	

SOURCE.—For absentee voters, CAVS (Loyola Marymount University 2003); for Election Day voters, *Los Angeles Times* exit poll (Los Angeles Times 2003).

* χ^2 significant at $p < .05$.

was not statistically significant. Consistent with previous studies, the biggest and most statistically significant differences between absentee and polling place voters were the age (Pearson $\chi^2 = 109.88$; $p = .000$) and education (Pearson $\chi^2 = 452.82$; $p = .000$) of these two groups, with absentee voters being considerably older and better educated than polling place voters. Among absentee voters, 41.8 percent were over age 60, compared with just 25.9 percent among Election Day voters, a gap of 15.9 percentage points. Similarly, 77.7 percent of absentee voters responded that they had attended college, in contrast to 59.3 percent of Election Day voters, a difference of 18.4 percentage points. Absentee voters were statistically less likely to report household incomes over \$100,000 (Pearson $\chi^2 = 62.67$; $p = .000$), which may be related to a larger elderly population on fixed incomes. With these demographic differences in mind, we next examine whether the policy preferences and voting patterns of absentee voters were significantly different from those of polling place voters.

In fact, as is also evident in table 4, the electoral preferences of absentee voters and Election Day voters in California's 2003 recall election were

almost identical. The recall of Governor Davis was supported by 56.0 percent of absentee voters, compared with 55.5 percent of polling place voters. On the question of who should replace Davis should the recall succeed, Schwarzenegger was the clear favorite of both groups of voters. The actor garnered 46.6 percent of the absentee vote and 49.0 percent of the Election Day vote. The other two leading candidates won roughly the same vote share from absentee and traditional voters. Bustamante received 33.2 percent of the absentee vote and 32.0 percent of the Election Day vote, and McClintock received 13.5 percent of the absentee vote and 13.0 percent of the polling place vote. With regard to state ballot initiative Proposition 54, the two groups of voters appeared to have the same preferences in defeating the measure.⁹ Although some demographic differences were apparent between the absentee and Election Day groups, these differences did not translate into disparate voting patterns.

Discussion

Based on the analysis of this election, it seems clear that absentee voters in the California recall did not have a significantly different political bent than Election Day voters, as many had suspected. Republicans were not more likely to vote absentee than Democrats, and absentee voters did not vote substantively different from Election Day voters. If anything, the evidence shown in table 2 suggests that many Californians (of all walks of life) vote absentee because it is simple, convenient, and easy to request and complete an absentee ballot. As both political parties continue to target absentee voters, we might expect absentee voters to resemble polling place voters. However, the data presented here are for one state and one high-salience election. Further research is necessary to examine the absentee voting phenomenon in lower-salience contests and in states with more stringent absentee voting requirements.

Appendix

QUESTION WORDING FROM THE LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY
CALIFORNIA ABSENTEE VOTER SURVEY, 2003

Absentee Vote: For the upcoming October 7 recall election, have you already voted using an absentee ballot?

9. To more rigorously test these results, we ran four probit models predicting whether the person voted absentee, whether the person voted “yes” on the recall, whether the person voted for Schwarzenegger, and whether the person voted “no” on Proposition 54 as dependent variables. The results of the probit models confirm our findings presented here, that absentee voters did not have different political preferences than polling place voters. The results of the probit analysis are available online at <http://www.lmu.edu/csla/absentee.html> (accessed April 3, 2006).

Recall Vote: On the first question on the ballot regarding the recall election, how did you vote? Did you vote Yes, to recall Governor Davis, or did you vote No, not to recall Governor Davis?

Governor Vote: On the second question on the ballot regarding the recall election, if you voted, which candidate did you vote for as governor in the case that Gray Davis is recalled? Did you vote for [ROTATE CANDIDATE NAMES] Cruz Bustamante, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Tom McClintock, Peter Camejo, Arianna Huffington, or someone else? [OR COULD VOLUNTEER: Did not vote for anyone].

Proposition 54 Vote: In addition to voting on the recall, voters were asked to consider Proposition 54—the Racial Privacy Initiative. Did you vote Yes or No on Prop. 54?

Times Voted Absentee: Before this election, how many times had you previously voted using an absentee ballot?

Reason Voted Absentee: What was the main reason that you decided to vote using an absentee ballot in the election this year? [OPEN-ENDED].

Income: What was your combined household income last year before taxes? Just stop me when I read the correct category. Was it up to \$15,000 . . . \$15,000 to \$24,999 . . . \$25,000 to \$34,999 . . . \$35,000 to \$49,999 . . . \$50,000 to \$64,999 . . . \$65,000 to \$79,999 . . . \$80,000 to \$99,999 . . . \$100,000 and above.

Education: What is the highest level of school you have completed? Grade school or less . . . Some high school . . . High school graduate . . . Some college/vocational . . . College graduate (BA, BS) . . . Graduate.

Race: What is your race or ethnicity? White non-Hispanic . . . Hispanic or Latino . . . African American . . . Asian American . . . Other.

Age: Information recorded from voter rolls.

Gender: Information recorded from voter rolls.

Party Registration: Information recorded from voter rolls.

QUESTION WORDING FROM THE LOS ANGELES TIMES CALIFORNIA
RECALL ELECTION EXIT POLL #490, OCTOBER 7, 2003

Recall Vote: In the election to recall Governor Davis, did you just vote: Yes, to recall Governor Davis; No, not to recall Governor Davis; I did not vote.

Governor Vote: On the second part of the recall question, which candidate did you just vote for? Cruz Bustamante, Democrat; Tom McClintock, Republican; Arnold Schwarzenegger, Republican; Peter Miguel Camejo, Green Party; Arianna Huffington, Independent; Someone else; Did not vote.

Proposition 54: How did you just vote on Proposition 54? (Classification by race, ethnicity) Voted yes, Voted no, Did not vote.

Income: If you added together the yearly income of all the members of your family living at home last year, would the total be less than \$20,000 . . . \$20,000 to \$39,999 . . . \$40,000 . . . \$59,999 . . . \$60,000 to \$74,999 . . . \$75,000 to \$99,999 . . . \$100,000 or more.

Education: What was the last grade of regular school that you completed? I did not graduate from high school . . . I have a high school diploma . . . I attended college but did not graduate . . . I have a college degree . . . I studied at graduate school . . . I have a graduate degree.

Race: What is your racial or ethnic background? White (non-Hispanic) . . . Black . . . Latino or Hispanic . . . Asian . . . American Indian . . . Other.

Age: How old are you?

Gender: Are you male or female?

Party Registration: Are you registered to vote as a Democrat . . . Republican . . .

Decline to state (Independent) . . . Other party member.

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