

# THE FIELD POLL

THE INDEPENDENT AND NON-PARTISAN SURVEY  
OF PUBLIC OPINION ESTABLISHED IN 1947 AS  
THE CALIFORNIA POLL BY MERVIN FIELD

**Field Research Corporation**  
601 California Street, Suite 900  
San Francisco, CA 94108-2814  
(415) 392-5763 FAX: (415) 434-2541  
EMAIL: [fieldpoll@field.com](mailto:fieldpoll@field.com)  
[www.field.com/fieldpollonline](http://www.field.com/fieldpollonline)

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**PROPOSAL TO CHANGE CALIFORNIA'S  
WINNER-TAKE-ALL ALLOCATION OF  
ELECTORAL VOTES IN PRESIDENTIAL  
ELECTIONS HAS EARLY SUPPORT, BUT  
DIVIDES VOTERS ALONG PARTISAN  
LINES.**

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By Mark DiCamillo and Mervin Field

California, along with forty-seven other states, awards all of its electoral votes (EV) in presidential elections to the statewide popular vote winner. However, an initiative that may appear on next June's statewide primary would attempt to change this, with potential far-reaching effects on the outcomes of the November 2008 and subsequent presidential elections.

A ballot initiative has been submitted to the state Attorney General that would allocate the state's bloc of 55 EVs to the winner in each of the state's 53 congressional districts, while allocating its two remaining EVs to the statewide popular vote winner.

*The Field Poll* in its most recent survey tested voter reaction to the concept embodied in the initiative and how they felt after its political impact was described. The results show that voters initially support the idea of allocating California's EVs on a district level by a 47% to 35% margin.

After voters are told of the political implications of the change, opinions become somewhat more divided, with those backing a changeover to a district-by-district allocation method outnumbering those favoring winner-take-all by a 49% to 42% margin. Opinions are highly partisan, with 70% of Republicans endorsing the changeover to a district-by-district allocation method. Democrats and non-partisans, by contrast, favor keeping the current winner-take-all approach but by narrower five-to-four margins.

### **Initial support for EV change**

Voter reactions to the idea of changing the way California allocates its EVs from a winner-take-all system to a district-by-district allocation was initially posed in the following way to voters included in the survey:

*"Under current rules in presidential elections the candidate winning California's statewide popular vote is awarded all 55 of California's electoral votes. This is called the winner-take-all system. A ballot initiative has been proposed to change this to a system that would allocate the state's electoral votes on a district-by-district basis, according to which candidate gets the most votes in each congressional district. Generally speaking, which method of allocating California's electoral votes do you prefer – the current winner-take-all method or the proposed district-by-district method?"*

Overall, voters favor the proposed district-by-district method over the traditional winner-take-all system by a 47% to 35% margin.

Republicans initially favor the district EV allocation method by a two to one margin (57% to 28%), while Democrats are evenly divided, with 42% favoring the current winner-take-all system and 41% preferring the proposed district-by-district method. More non-partisans prefer the proposed district allocation method (43%) than the winner-take-all system (34%).

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**Table 1**  
**Initial opinions of a proposal to change the way California's electoral votes are allocated in presidential elections, from the current statewide "winner-take-all" to a district-by-district allocation, based on who wins within each of the state's congressional districts (among California registered voters)**

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	<b><u>Change to a district-by-district method</u></b>	<b><u>Keep winner-take-all method</u></b>	<b><u>Neither/no opinion</u></b>
Total registered voters	47%	35	18
<b><u>Party</u></b>			
(.43) Democrats	41%	42	17
(.34) Republicans	57%	28	15
(.23) Non-partisans/others	43%	34	23

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### **Changes in voter inclinations after the impact of the EV change is explained**

The Field Poll then posed a follow-up question whereby the political implications of changing the winner-take-all system on the state's EV allocation was explained to voters. This question was posed as follows:

*"Democratic candidates have comfortably carried California in each of the past 4 presidential elections and under the current winner-take-all system, each was awarded all of the state's electoral votes. If California had been using the proposed district-by-district allocation method in these elections, the Republican candidate would have been awarded as many as twenty-two of the state's electoral votes, since a number of the state's congressional districts favor Republican candidates. Does this make you more inclined or less inclined to want to change the state's current winner-take-all system to a district-by-district allocation method?"*

The responses to this question result in 38% of voters saying they would be more inclined to support the proposed change, 31% less inclined and 23% maintaining that the implications described would have no effect on their original disposition. Another 8% had no opinion.

There are big partisan differences in voter reactions to this follow-up question, with more Democrats and non-partisans saying they would be less inclined to support a change and more Republicans saying they'd be even more inclined to support it.

**Table 2**  
**How being told of the impact that the new district-by-district electoral vote allocation method would have had on recent California presidential elections, affects voter preferences of the proposal to change the system (among registered voters)**

	<b>More inclined to support the change</b>	<b>Less inclined to support the change</b>	<b>No effect</b>	<b>No opinion</b>
Total registered voters	38%	31	23	8
<u>Party</u>				
(.43) Democrats	27%	43	20	10
(.34) Republicans	61%	14	21	4
(.23) Non-partisan/other	26%	35	32	7

**Combining the results from the two questions**

A summary table can then be constructed to reflect the shifts in opinion after the political effects of the initiative proposal are explained.

In one group, amounting to 49% of voters, are those who support the district method in both questions, plus those who didn't originally favor the district method but who became more supportive after hearing of its political implications.

The other group, amounting to 42% of voters, are those who preferred the winner-take-all system in both questions, plus those who didn't originally favor winner-take-all but said they were less inclined to change the current system after learning of its political impact in the second question.

The remaining proportion (9%) includes those who say they have no preference in the initial question and are not influenced by the political implications of changing California's EV allocation.

After the political implications of the change are factored in, voter opinions become even more partisan. Republican support the idea of changing to a district-by-district allocation method by a 70% to 24% margin. Democrats and non-partisans oppose the change, but by narrower five to four margins.

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**Table 3**  
**Voter preferences after combining answers from both questions**  
**(among registered voters)**

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	<b><u>Change to a district-by- district method</u></b>	<b><u>Keep winner- take-all method</u></b>	<b><u>Neither/ no opinion</u></b>
Total registered voters	49%	42	9
<b><u>Party</u></b>			
(.43) Democrats	41%	53	6
(.34) Republicans	70%	24	6
(.23) Non-partisans/others	37%	51	12

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### **Background**

Nationally, each of the last two presidential elections in 2000 and 2004 were extremely close both in their popular and electoral college vote totals. But, if the district-by-district EV allocation had been in effect in California, the electoral vote count, which actually determines who wins the presidency, would not nearly have been as close. For example, in the 2004 election instead of awarding all 55 of California's EVs to Democrat John Kerry, he would have received 33 EVs, while 22 would have gone to Republican George W. Bush, resulting in only an 11 EV advantage for the Democrat in California. Nationally, this would have resulted in a net shift of 44 electoral votes.

The political impact of changing the EV allocation method would mean that even if the Democratic candidate were to carry California's statewide vote in future elections, the advantage he or she would receive from this would be far less than it has been in the past. In effect, it would require the Democratic candidate to win the equivalent of both Ohio and Florida in future elections to make up for the net shift in EVs lost resulting from California changing its EV allocation method. Conversely, it would also serve to offset a Republican loss in some of the other smaller states or one relatively large state.

The proposed ballot initiative is being promoted by a group of California Republicans, with support from national GOP interests. In reaction, a number of California Democratic leaders, as well as others throughout the country, have begun joining forces to launch a campaign against the initiative.

Given the stakes involved, it is likely that each side will raise massive amounts of money from all parts of the country in an attempt to influence the outcome of California's ballot

initiative. The huge implications that the initiative could have in determining who would be the country's leader for the next four years would create intense state and national media attention, which itself could influence the initiative's outcome.

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### **Information About The Survey**

#### **Sample Details**

The findings in this report are based on a random sample survey of 536 registered voters statewide. Interviewing was conducted by telephone in English and Spanish August 3-12, 2007. Up to eight attempts were made to reach and interview each randomly selected voter on different days and times of day during the interviewing period.

The sample was developed from telephone listings of individual voters selected at random from a statewide list of registered voters in California. When drawing samples from registration-based lists, *The Field Poll* stratifies the sample by region and age to insure that the poll includes adequate representations of voters across each major region of the state and across different age categories. Once a voter's name and telephone number has been selected, interviews are attempted only with the specified voter. Interviews can be conducted on either the voter's landline or cell phone, depending on the source of the telephone listing from the voter file. After the completion of interviewing, the results are weighted slightly to *Field Poll* estimates of the demographic and regional characteristics of the state's registered voter population.

Sampling error estimates applicable to any probability-based survey depend on sample size. According to statistical theory, 95% of the time results from findings based on the overall sample of registered voters are subject to a sampling error of +/- 4.5 percentage points. There are other possible sources of error in any survey other than sampling variability. Different results could occur because of differences in question wording, the sequencing of questions, the rigor with which sampling procedures are implemented, as well as other factors.

#### **Questions Asked**

Under current rules in presidential elections, the candidate winning California's statewide popular vote is awarded all 55 of California's electoral votes. This is called the winner-take-all system. A ballot initiative has been proposed to change this to a system that would allocate the state's electoral votes on a district-by-district basis, according to which candidate gets the most votes in each congressional district. Generally speaking, which method of allocating California's electoral votes do you prefer – the current winner-take-all method or the proposed district-by-district method?

Democratic candidates have comfortably carried California in each of the past 4 presidential elections and under the current winner-take-all system, each was awarded all of the state's electoral votes. If California had been using the proposed district-by-district allocation method in these elections, the Republican candidate would have been awarded as many as twenty-two of the state's electoral votes, since a number of the state's congressional districts favor Republican candidates. Does this make you more inclined or less inclined to want to change the state's current winner-take-all system to a district-by-district allocation method?