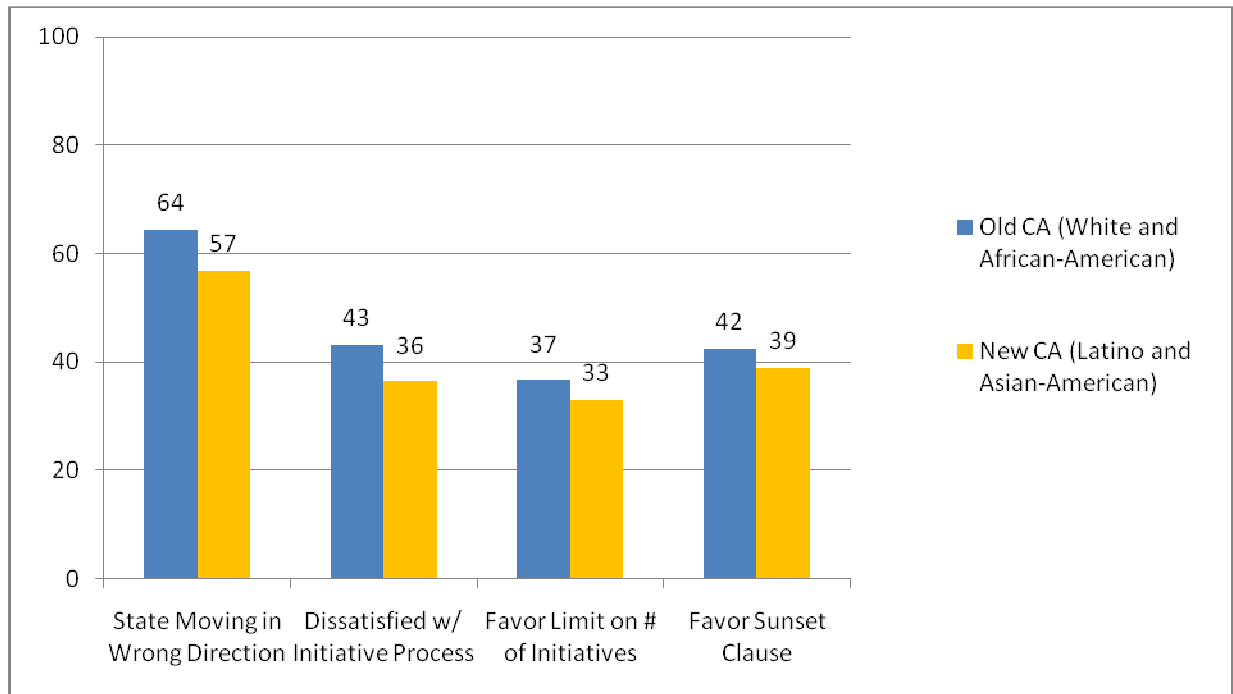


“Old” and “New” Californians Differ on Constitutional Reform

Divide on Direct Democracy Reform, “New California” vs. “Old California”



California Constitutional Reform Project Policy Paper 2009.2

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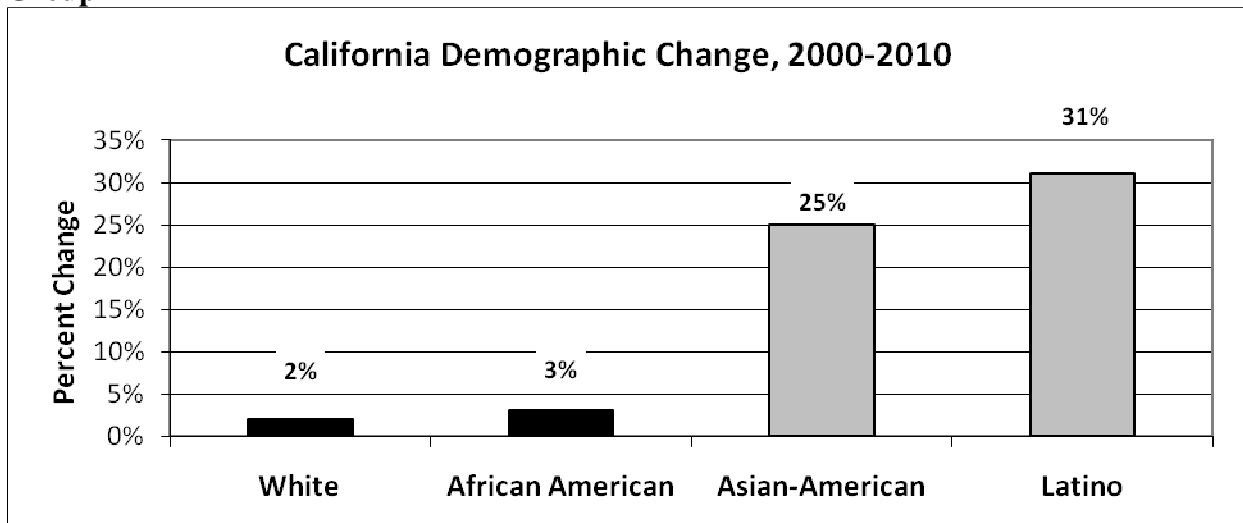
Summary: “Old” and “New” Californians differ on constitutional reform. A Stanford poll finds that Latinos and Asian-Americans are less dissatisfied with the initiative process and less eager to change California's constitution to restrict direct democracy than whites and African-Americans. Additionally, these “New” Californians are less certain about their views on reforming the constitution.

“New” and “Old” California

As Californians consider reforming the state constitution, a Stanford University poll has found the preferences for political reform of California’s fastest-growing racial and ethnic groups substantially differ from the views of groups whose share of the state population is on the decline. And it is in the realm of direct democracy — which empowers voters to make policy through the ballot box — where the divisions between Latinos and Asian-Americans, on the one hand, and whites and African-Americans, on the other, are most profound. Latinos and Asian-Americans are less dissatisfied with the initiative process and less eager to change California's constitution to restrict direct democracy than whites and African-Americans. Latinos and Asian-Americans will make up an ever-increasing share of the Californian electorate that will vote on initiatives over the next century.

The finding also raises concerns about reforms that could restrict the use of direct democracy. As we look toward rewriting the California constitution — the governing document that will guide us toward our state’s future — it is crucial that Californians of all backgrounds are included in the process.

Figure 1. Population Growth from 2000 to 2010, by Racial or Ethnic Group



Data courtesy of California Department of Finance.

Figure 1 suggests that Latinos and Asian-Americans, the two fastest growing ethnic groups represent the “New California,” while white and African-American, voters who make up the “Old California” electorate, will see their shares of the population and their voting power decline in coming decades. What is striking is that the new survey shows that voters who make

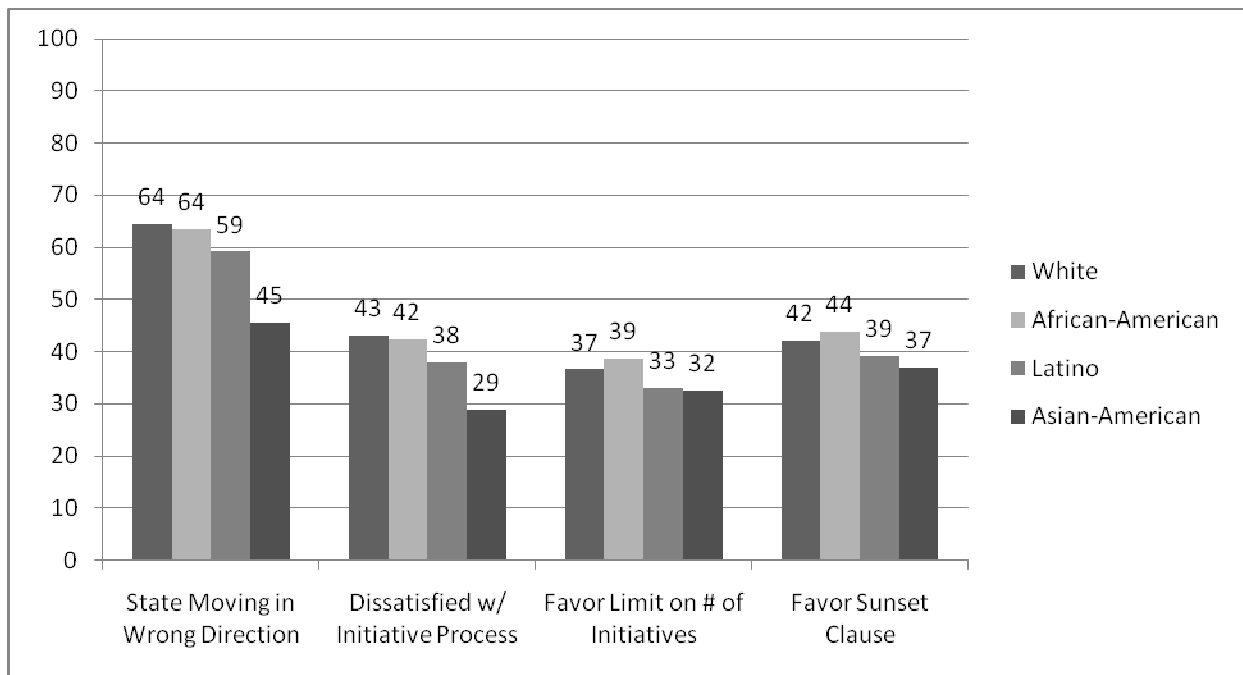
up the New and Old Californians hold different views on policies that will be affected by these demographic shifts.

Gap on Proposed Direct Democracy Reforms

Figure 2 breaks down the poll’s findings by racial and ethnic groups, while Figure 3 summarizes the gap between New and Old California. Both show that while 64% of white and African-American respondents see the state as moving in the wrong direction, only 59% of Latinos and 45% of Asian-Americans in California share this negative assessment. When the survey asked respondents what they thought of the state’s initiative process, 43% of those representing Old California were somewhat or very dissatisfied with it, compared to 36% of respondents from New California.

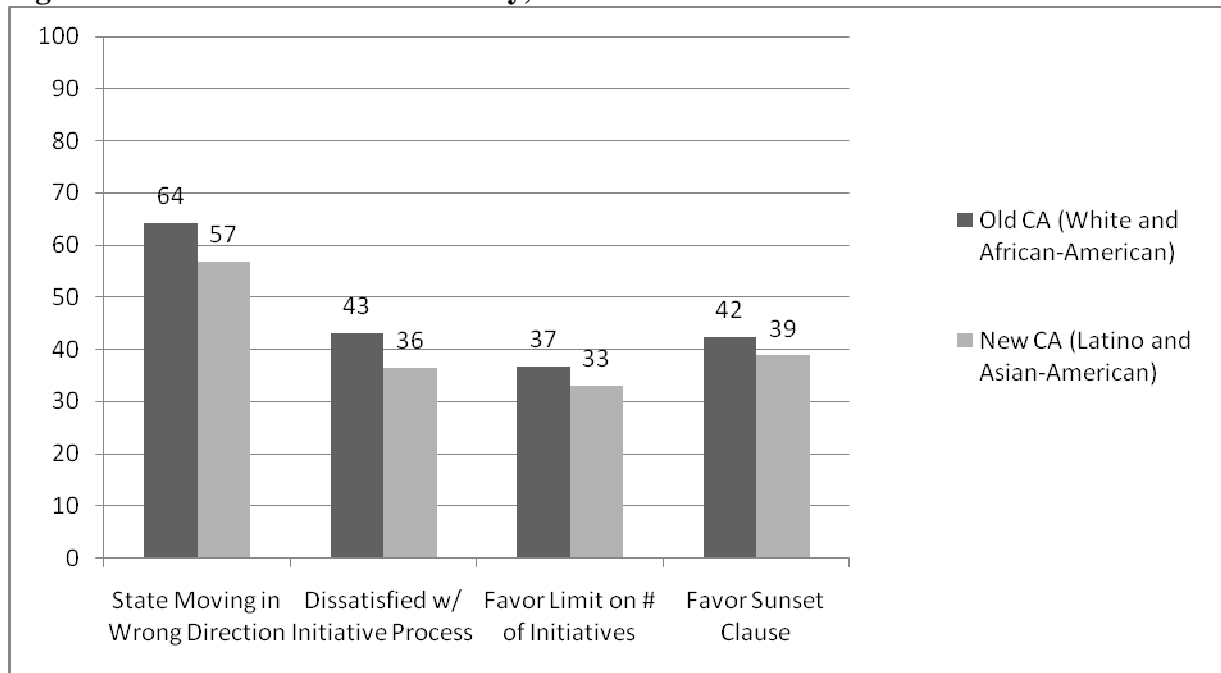
Specifically, Latinos and Asian Americans are less likely than white and African-American respondents to say that the state is moving in the wrong direction, and less likely to express concerns about the initiative process. Most relevant to the current constitutional debate is that Latinos and Asian Americans are also less supportive of reforms that would limit the the initiative process.

Figure 2. Divide on Direct Democracy, by Racial or Ethnic Group



Data from survey of representative sample of Californians conducted by the Bill Lane Center for the American West, Stanford University.

Figure 3. Divide on Direct Democracy, “New California” versus “Old California”



Data from survey of representative sample of Californians conducted by the Bill Lane Center for the American West, Stanford University.

These political assessments translate directly into views on constitutional reform, the survey found. The survey asked about two proposals to place limits on the initiative process: one would cap the number of initiatives that could appear on any one ballot, and the other would require that all initiatives have a sunset clause causing them to expire after a certain number of years if they are not readopted. Respondents from the Old California were more likely to favor limits on direct democracy than those from the New California. Support for a cap on the number of initiatives was stronger among white and African-American respondents (37% and 39% respectively) than among Latinos and Asian-Americans (33% and 32%). On the sunset clause proposal, whites and African-Americans (42% and 44%) were more supportive than Latinos and Asian-Americans (39% and 37%).

To be sure, these differences represent a gap, rather than an unbridgeable gulf. The results are statistically significant. Differences this big between Old and New California would appear by chance fewer than 10 times if the poll were repeated 100 times. These gaps of 4 to 7 percentage points are similar in scale to the “gender gap” in many polls. However, auguring an irreparable division among Californians, the poll serves as an important reminder that the process of constitutional reform may not produce widely-popular proposals if deliberations over reform fail to include a broad cross-section of Californians.

When California’s first constitution was written in 1849, eight of the 49 delegates were Spanish speakers. When it was rewritten in 1878 and 1879, there were no Spanish speakers or Asian-Americans — a group that made up nearly 9% of the state’s population then — among the 153 delegates. If the same sort of homogenous convention of delegates were convened today, our poll suggests it could produce constitutional reforms that fail to represent California’s future.

Differences in Uncertainty

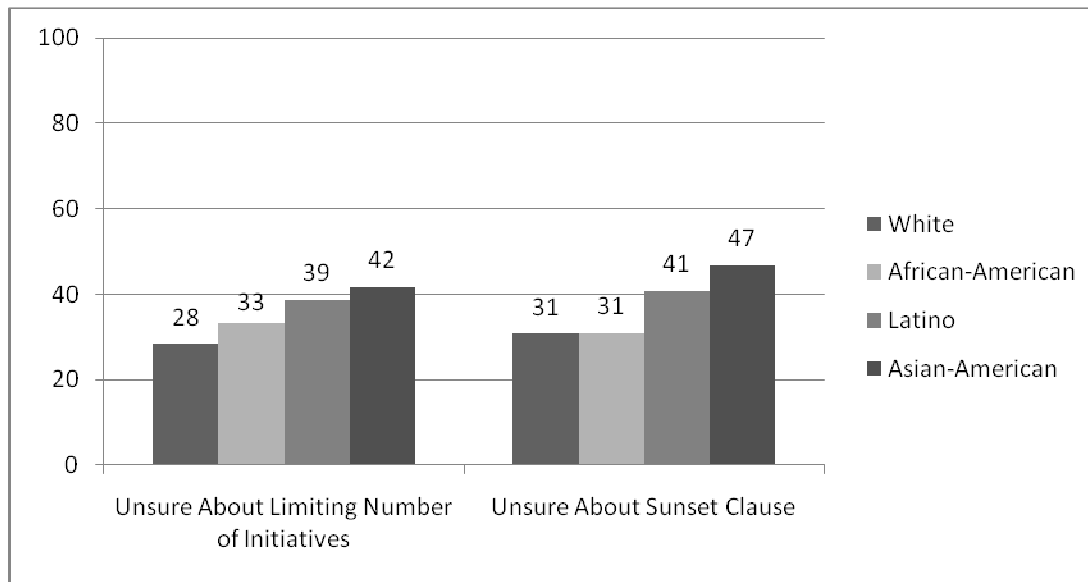
In addition to being less supportive of proposed reforms to the initiative process than whites and African-Americans, more Latinos and Asian-Americans report that they are unsure about their position on these important reform issues. Among whites and African-Americans, 28% and 33% respectively were unsure of their position on limiting the number of initiatives that could be placed on the ballot. Among Latinos and Asian-Americans, 39% and 42% responded that they were unsure of their position. The difference was even more pronounced on the issue of implementing a sunset clause for initiatives: 31% of whites and African-Americans reported being unsure about whether they favored or opposed the reform, while 41% of Latinos and 47% of Asian-Americans were unsure.

These differences do not appear to be the result of a gap in either political interest or knowledge. Across racial and ethnic groups, Californians of all ethnic backgrounds are just as likely to say that they pay attention to politics at least some of the time. And when asked a battery of questions designed to gauge respondents' knowledge about both national and state politics, no racial or ethnic group moved to the head of the class or fell far behind.

Regardless of racial or ethnic background, many Californians are not making the connection between their opinions about public policy and proposed constitutional reforms, the survey found. When asked about their positions on the proposed elimination of the two-thirds "supermajority" requirement for passing the state budget — a legislative rule that, according to experts, keeps tax rates and revenue lower than they would be under a simple majority voting rule — less than one-quarter of the poll respondents took a position on the reform that matched their preference about tax and spending levels, another question asked in the poll.

This disconnect does appear to vary across racial and ethnic groups, with the largest difference between whites and Latinos. Among whites who want to pay more taxes and have more services as well as those who want to have fewer taxes and fewer services, slightly more than half of each group took a position on the two-thirds budget rule that was consistent with their preference for tax and spending (54% of the higher tax/service group favor eliminating and 53% of the lower tax/service group favor keeping the 2/3rd rule). Latino respondents matched their policy and reform positions less consistently than whites. In both the high and low tax/spending groups, only 45% of Latino respondents took a position on the two-thirds budget rule consistent with their preference for taxes and spending. This difference exists despite similar levels of knowledge about the presumed effect of the two-thirds rule on taxes across racial and ethnic groups.

Figure 4. “New California” More Unsure About Proposed Constitutional Reforms



Data from survey of representative sample of Californians conducted by the Bill Lane Center for the American West, Stanford University.

The differences in opinions across racial and ethnic groups, despite their similar levels of political interest and knowledge, could be the product of differences in how state political issues are covered by the media consumed by Old California and New California. The survey did not ask questions that gauge the quality of news and opinion being consumed by Californians. But if traditional media outlets tend to have more reporting, news analysis, and commentary about proposed constitutional reforms than is carried in the new ethnic media, Old Californians who use the mainstream media to form their opinions may more readily form preferences about the California political process than New Californians who rely on ethnic media. The prospect of a disparity in coverage of politics and the political process is a good reminder that a constitutional reform debate that includes all Californians will need to be carried out in all the state’s media, old and new.

The Bill Lane Center for the American West poll of 1,000 Californians was conducted in August 2008 by YouGovPolimetrix, an internet polling firm based in Palo Alto, CA. The survey was conducted in preparation for planning “Getting to Reform: Avenues to Constitutional Change in California,” a conference October 14 in Sacramento, sponsored by the Bill Lane Center for the American West at Stanford University, the Institute of Governmental Studies, University of California, Berkeley, and the Center for California Studies, California State University, Sacramento. See: <http://igs.berkeley.edu/events/reform2010.html>

YouGovPolimetrix recruits individuals into their pool of poll respondents, obtains relevant demographic information about each individual, and creates a sample of respondents that is representative of the population of interest.

The Bill Lane Center for the American West at Stanford University is dedicated to advancing scholarly and public understanding of the past, present, and future of western North America. The Center supports research, teaching, and reporting about western land and life in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.