

The Trump Effect in California's Mid-Term Congressional Elections

by Mark DiCamillo

In the final weeks leading up to November 2018 mid-term elections, President Donald Trump encouraged voters across the country to vote as if he were on the ballot. This got me to thinking what this might mean for California. After all, Trump had lost California in the 2016 presidential election by 30 percentage points. In addition, a statewide *Berkeley IGS Poll* completed two weeks before the election showed the President's job performance ratings among likely voters underwater statewide by 23 percentage points, with 61% disapproving and just 38% approving.

With the returns from the mid-term now in, we know the result -- a new low for the state's Republican party, and especially with regard to its representation in the U.S. Congress, where it lost seven seats to the Democrats.

This result didn't come as a complete surprise to followers of the *Berkeley IGS Poll*. In a series of polls conducted in late September among likely voters across eight Republican-held congressional districts on behalf of the *Los Angeles Times* the poll foreshadowed the potential for significant GOP losses in the state's congressional elections. The eight GOP-held congressional districts polled included CA10 (Denham), CA22 (Nunes), CA25 (Knight), CA39 (an open seat vacated by Royce), CA45 (Walters), CA48 (Rohrabacher), CA49 (an open seat vacated by Issa), and CA50 (Hunter). (*Note: Unfortunately, the study did not include CA21 (Valadao), which the Democrats captured in the November 2018 election.*)

The polls were administered using a relatively new methodology that the Berkeley IGS Poll has pioneered in its statewide surveys of California voters throughout 2018. The polls' data collection was completed online by distributing email invitations to stratified random samples of registered voters whose email address was appended to their official voting record. Invitations were sent out in English and Spanish across all districts, and in the 48th district, in Vietnamese as well due the large contingent of Vietnamese voters in the district. The invitations asked voters to participate in a non-partisan survey conducted by IGS providing a link to the IGS website where the survey questionnaire was housed.

At the conclusion of data collection post-stratification weights were applied to align each district's registered voter sample to characteristics of the district's overall registered voter population. Likely voters were then identified based on stated intention, interest and voting history of each voter. Over 5,000 likely voters were identified using this method across the eight districts, with sample sizes ranging from 527 to 912 voters per district.

Results of the poll were reported by the *Times* on page 1 of its print edition and as their featured political story in their Thursday, October 4 online editions under David Lauter's byline. The headline and lede of the news article read as follows: "*Heavy risks for GOP in battleground races in state . . . Republicans are at risk of a wipe out in California's six most hotly contested congressional races.*"

A common thread underlying voter preferences in each district was the consistent strong correlation between how voters viewed the job Trump was doing as President and whom they intended to support for congress in their district. Among voters who approved of the job Trump was doing, about nine in ten supported the GOP candidate for Congress. Conversely, among voters who disapproved of the President's performance, about nine in ten were supporting the Democratic candidate.

The problem for the GOP was that in six of the eight districts polled Trump's job ratings were underwater, with majorities disapproving of the President's performance. Not coincidentally, all six districts were captured by the Democrats in the state's November mid-term elections.

The *Times* news story emphasized the effect that Trump was having on voter preferences, stating that *"reaction to President Trump appears to drive the results more than any specific issue and, in most cases, more than the individual candidates."*

By contrast, in the two districts that the Republicans were able to hold in this cycle majorities of likely voters approved of the President's performance. Trump's approval rating and the preferences of likely voters in the late-September *Berkeley IGS Poll* are shown below, along with the election outcomes in each district.

The Trump effect also played a significant role in the overall statewide election, especially with regard to voter turnout. The 12.7 million Californians who voted in this year's mid-term included 5 million more voters than voted in the state's last mid-term election in 2014, and corresponded to a turnout of 65.3 percent of the state's registered voters, the largest in any California mid-term election since 1982.

The Trump effect was most pronounced among the state's Latino voters, majorities of whom strongly disapproved of the job Trump was doing as President and who voted heavily for the Democratic candidates in each district. According to a post-election analysis of the state's November 2018 general election vote by Paul Mitchell of Political Data, Inc. over 2.6 million Latinos participated statewide, more than double the 1.1 million Latinos who voted in 2014. In addition, when analyzing the Latino voter turnout across the congressional districts that flipped from Republican to Democratic in the 2018 Latino turnout as a percentage of the total vote increased by an average of six percentage points and was on par with their turnout in these districts in the 2016 presidential election.

President Trump, of course, was not solely responsible for the big turnout. But, as one of the most polarizing political figures in modern American politics, he gave the California Democratic Party an historic opportunity that they fully exploited through well-financed and effective outreach campaigns to get their supporters to the polls.

By contrast, the state Republican Party's efforts to increase turnout rested largely on their qualifying an initiative, Proposition 6, on the November statewide ballot to repeal a recently enacted increase in the state's gasoline taxes. Backers of Proposition 6 felt its presence on the ballot would draw larger numbers of Republican and conservative voters

to the polls to repeal the tax. However, the election returns and our pre-election *Berkeley IGS Polls* across the eight congressional districts suggested that this strategy wasn't effective.

Not only was the gas tax repeal soundly defeated by fourteen percentage points statewide, the *Berkeley IGS Poll* showed the issue was not generating much excitement among likely voters, even in the eight Republican-held congressional districts where the repeal initiative was more popular. When asking likely voters in each district to assess the importance of twelve issues when voting in this year's election, the gas tax repeal initiative ranked no higher than sixth among likely voters in any of the districts. According to the poll, more traditional issues like health care, the economy, immigration, taxes and gun laws were of greater concern among district voters.

Results of the state's 2018 mid-term election mark a new low for the state Republican Party, which not all that long ago held considerable sway over politics at both the state and national levels. After all, California launched the political careers of both Presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, and as recently as twenty years ago Republicans accounted for nearly half of the state's congressional delegation.

Not only were the Republicans shut out from all statewide constitutional office elections, the Democrats widen their supermajorities in both the state Senate and Assembly. But their loss of seven seats to Democrat House candidates in the state's mid-term election was most significant. And, if the results of the *Berkeley IGS Polls* are any guide, these losses can primarily be attributed to President Donald Trump and the impact that he was having on the state's voters.

Mr. DiCamillo is currently director of the Berkeley IGS Poll at the Institute of Governmental Studies at UC Berkeley. Previously he served as director the non-partisan Field (California) Poll for more than 25 years. This report was updated from an article published in the November 19, 2018 edition (Vol. 34, No. 21) of The Polling Report a nationally syndicated publication reporting on trends affecting elections, government and business edited by Tom Silver.

For more information about the Berkeley IGS Poll's late-September 2018 congressional district polls, as well as other recent Berkeley IGS Poll reports, please visit <https://igs.berkeley.edu/igs-poll/berkeley-igs-poll>.