

# The People's Voice

## Voters Serious about Addressing Pandemic Consequences

Californians are taking the COVID-19 pandemic seriously, and expect their elected leaders to do the same. The sixth annual CalChamber poll, *The People's Voice, 2020*, found that voters are keenly aware of the widespread effects of the pandemic.

Nearly half of all voters have suffered an economic impact: reduced work hours, lost job, pay cut, or unpaid leave. More than six months after California first began shutting down its economy, nearly half of voters reported their workplace still was not operating normally; instead, employers have reduced services, closed temporarily or permanently, or are operating online only.

This perception extended to their communities. Nearly half of voters reported “a lot of businesses” shut down in their communities, and nearly 6 in 10 reported “a lot of jobs lost.”

### OPINIONS SPLIT

The bottom line: voters are deeply split over which direction to take in addressing economic recovery: just over half want to continue to safely reopen businesses to stabilize the economy and preserve jobs, while just under half want to return to tougher restrictions in order to limit the spread of the virus.

The demographics of this issue reflect the health and economic effects. The strongest proponents of tougher restrictions are young people, Hispanics and residents in the Los Angeles area. Strongest proponents of safely reopening to stabilize the economy are older voters, Republicans and residents of San Diego/Orange counties and the Central Valley.

Nearly 7 in 10 voters are concerned about the risks that they or their immediate family members face from working outside the home during the pandemic, with half of them very concerned. More promising, voters seemed satisfied with the efforts their employers are taking to keep them safe, with more than half reporting their employers are doing “a lot” to protect them from contracting Covid, with another third reporting employers are doing “some” Covid protection.

Nonetheless, voters remain pessimistic about our economic recovery. Half of voters said “the worst is yet to come” regarding the economic impact of Covid, such as businesses shutting down, while only 1 out of 7 voters said that “the worst is behind us.”

The inescapable conclusion is that elected leaders will be judged on their response to Covid. Governor Gavin Newsom's approval ratings eroded slightly from the summer of 2020 to early November 2020, when the poll was conducted. He retained a 50%-50% excellent/good versus fair/poor rating, down from a 57%-43% margin in July 2020.

### SUPPORT FOR LABOR LAW CHANGES

An obvious starting point for directly addressing some of these issues would be to update labor laws to reflect facts on the ground.

Because of the pandemic, many Californians are working from home, many with school-age children who are taking remote learning, and who lack adequate child care. Telecommuting has become the new normal—and could very well become entrenched long after the pandemic is brought to heel.

Voters overwhelmingly agree (86%, 42% strongly) that the state's labor laws should be changed so that employees working from home have more flexible hours, as well as relaxed meal and break times.

What's more, having had a taste of telecommuting, voters agree (92%, 55% strongly) with policies that would make it easier for businesses to allow employees to telecommute under a variety of conditions—not just during a pandemic emergency—such as for employees with school-age children, those without child care, and to encourage more work-from-home to reduce commutes and highway congestion, and cut greenhouse gas emissions.

### CONCERN FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Voters are also very concerned about the effects of the pandemic on public schools, and are looking to state leaders for better guidance. They agree that distance learning is an effective way to contain the spread of Covid, but are very concerned (87%, 48% strongly) that distance learning is almost impossible for poor or disadvantaged public school students without access to computers or internet.

# Agenda for California Recovery

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Voters agree (85%, 53% strongly) that Governor Newsom and state leaders should provide specific guidance on how and when schools can reopen. They also crave more information (87%, 42% strongly) about how public schools are teaching their children and about educational alternatives to traditional public schools.

### **COST OF LIVING CONCERNS**

But the pandemic isn't the only issue troubling Californians. The cost of living remains a profound concern.

When asked if their family would have a better future if they left California, a stunning 54% agreed—27% strongly. Of those agreeing with this statement, two-thirds cited “cost of living” or “cost of housing” as the main reason, while another 3 in 10 cited “California values are not my values.”

Demographically, voters who most strongly agree that their future would be better if they left the state are middle-aged residents, Republicans and families with children living at home.

### **HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS**

California voters agree that the state has a housing crisis, and voters in the Los Angeles and Bay Areas believe it's worst in their neighborhoods. A majority of voters believe that increasing housing supply is a better solution than tax or developer subsidies for affordable housing. But in a sign of the difficulty of fashioning statewide solutions, a strong plurality of voters believe local officials should have the right to decide the type and pace of homebuilding development within their own communities.

Homelessness remains an issue of great concern to voters. Fully two-thirds believe homelessness in California has gotten worse since the start of Covid in 2020, with voters in Los Angeles, the Inland Empire and Central Valley reporting severe worsening in their regions.

Three-quarters of voters report seeing someone homeless on the streets at least weekly, with 40% reporting seeing homeless persons at least five times a week.

### **CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENERGY**

Governor Newsom has continued his predecessors' attention on addressing climate change, and voters support this policy focus.

A majority of voters agree that climate change affects the state of California “a great deal,” and 63% agree that California should take the lead in regulating greenhouse gases because the federal government is not addressing the problem, compared with 37% who believe that California should not adopt state-specific policies that harm the state economy, and should support only a nationwide strategy.

Voters initially support (58%–41%) the Governor's much-publicized executive order banning all in-state sales of gasoline-powered vehicles by 2035, but become more skeptical when asked about some of the tradeoffs inherent in adopting such a far-reaching strategy.

Fewer than 1 in 8 voters want the Governor to execute this policy on his own. A strong majority would prefer this major policy be decided by voters on the ballot, while 20% would prefer the Legislature consider and decide this policy.

By a 4 to 1 margin, voters agree that “Banning gas-powered vehicles should only be allowed if electric vehicles are as affordable as gas-powered vehicles. Government mandates should not force consumers to buy more expensive cars and trucks.” A majority strongly agree with this sentiment.

By a 3 to 1 margin, voters agree that electric vehicle owners should pay the costs of charging their cars, including the cost of charging stations to be built around the state, rather than having all electric utility customers subsidize the costs of charging stations.

### **CONTROLLING WILDFIRES**

Voters recognize that rampant wildfires can be addressed only with a diversity of solutions.

They gave their strongest support for controlled burning to eliminate the dry underbrush, no matter if public or private lands; requiring homeowners living in fire-prone areas to keep their land clear of flammable brush, upgrade to safe building materials, and create personal evacuation plans; and increasing penalties for actions that lead to wildfires.

But voters also strongly endorse expensive and controversial notions, like modernizing the electrical grid and spending more on electrical equipment maintenance, even if it means environmental and renewable energy mandates are delayed, and even limiting future housing development in areas that are prone to wildfires.

### **TESTING STUDENTS**

Chaotic school schedules and widespread and often ineffective remote learning led to a suspension of statewide assessments of student progress. Many child advocates are pressing to ramp up assessments in 2021 to understand the distribution of impacts on students of the 2020 disruptive year.

Voters also support (65%–35%) state-level standardized testing as a useful tool that helps parents and teachers assess students' academic progress, rejecting the charge that standardized testing

is not a good measure of academic progress and has a negative impact on education and teaching.

They strongly agree (69%-31%) that testing helps schools and teachers improve the quality of education they provide, identifies schools and teachers that are not providing a high quality of education (70%-30%), and helps parents understand how well their children are learning and the quality of education their children are receiving (73%-27%).

Voters are concerned about the costs of assessments and that teachers often oppose the statewide measures.

#### **OPPOSITION TO TAX INCREASES REMAINS FIRM**

Finally, voters show no sign of weakening in their reluctance to consider higher taxes. Proposition 15, the proposed split roll property tax increase, failed at the November 2020 ballot;

nevertheless, government unions and spending constituencies still promote other tax hikes for schools, local government and other programs.

The CalChamber poll found that, by a 63% to 37% margin, voters soundly rejected one of these proposals, a tax increase on corporations of more than 50% and on millionaires by another 10%.

#### **POLL METHODOLOGY**

The CalChamber poll was conducted by Core Decision Analytics and Pierrepont Analytics with online interviews from November 6–9, 2020, with 1,009 online interviews of California 2020 general election voters. The margin of error for this study is +/- 3.1% at the 95% confidence level and larger for subgroups. This was the sixth year CalChamber has published a voter survey.



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