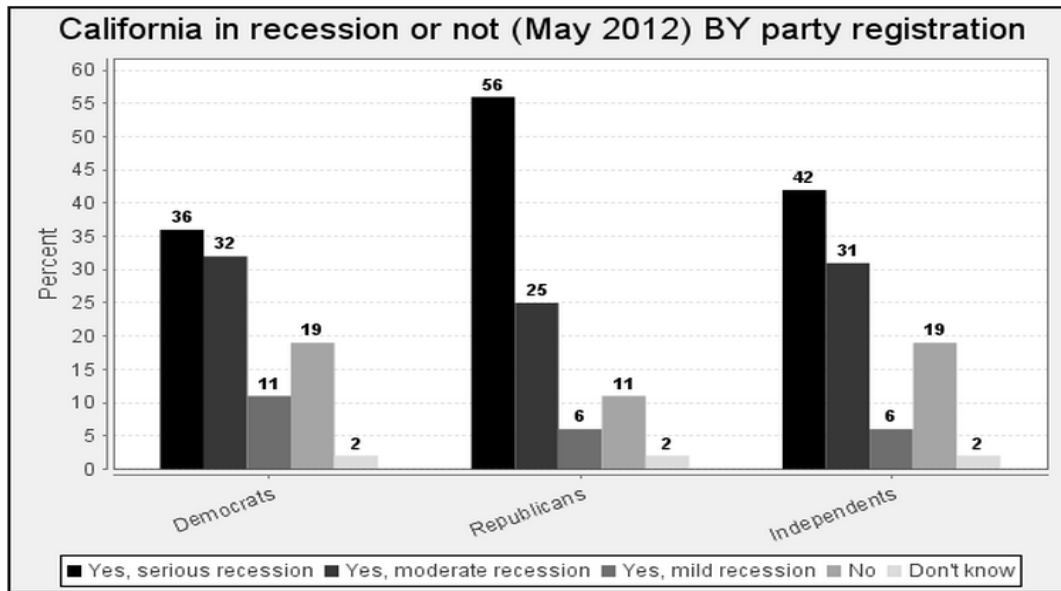


Mitchell's Musings 6-18-12: Central Tendency

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Current folk wisdom among politicians is that swing/centrist voters – independents who are neither Republicans nor Democrats – cast the deciding votes in presidential elections and that perceptions of where the labor market is going are key variables that matter.¹ There is less known about state and local elections but presumably such voters have an outsized influence there, too, given that folk wisdom. In this musing, I look at who those voter/swingers are, what their perceptions of the economy and labor market might be, and whether an electoral system change might produce a greater influence for them. I use information from California – not considered to be a swing state at the national level, admittedly - because that's what I have handy. The information comes from the Field Poll (<http://www.field.com>) which tracks California issues and elections and a poll taken regularly by the Public Policy Institute of California - PPIC (<http://www.ppic.org>).

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Source: Public Policy Institute of California at <http://173.203.69.22/quicktables/quickoptions.do> and http://www.ppic.org/main/publication_show.asp?i=526. PPIC data refer to "likely voters," a subset of registered voters. Independents include those registered with minor parties.

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¹ There seems to be a tendency by those academics who use economic models to forecast elections to neglect the fact that regressions have error terms for a reason. There is also a tendency to forget that the ability of such models to predict behavior precisely and to capture the structure of economic influence when the economy is in an outlier position (as it is now) where there are few observations degrades. But that is another story.

The chart on the previous page indicates that Republicans in California have a more pessimistic view of the direction of the California economy than do Democrats and that independents fall in between. California – measured by the unemployment rate – has in absolute terms the third highest rate among the 50 states so one could be pessimistic on that score. Republicans have tended to be concentrated in inland areas of the state where in absolute terms unemployment has been especially high. On the other hand, the California unemployment rate has been gradually coming down, as in the rest of the U.S., so there is ongoing (but slow) improvement statewide.

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Field Poll: Direction of Job Opportunities in California (Release 2392; publication 9/27/11)

| | Worsen | No Change | Get Better |
|--------------|--------|-----------|------------|
| Democrats | 18% | 42% | 36% |
| Republicans | 37 | 48 | 11 |
| Independent* | 29 | 48 | 20 |

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* In California-speak, “independent” is generally not used as a descriptor because there is a minor party known as American Independent. Those voters that do not register for a party are called “decline to state” voters or nonpartisans. In the chart above and other Field references in the text, registered voters are the database and independents include nonpartisans and those registered with minor parties.

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When put in labor-market terms, rather than just economic, in qualitative terms the response ranking remains the same, as seen in the chart above.² Republicans are most pessimistic, independents are in the middle, and Democrats are more optimistic than the others (but in absolute terms they cannot be termed optimistic). However, what is striking is that almost half of the independents don’t perceive an improvement in the job market (even though one has been occurring). That perception could be unique to California – perhaps the high absolute unemployment rate clouds any vision of the gradual recover. If I were a political pollster, however, I would be checking out whether that perception of a job market going nowhere among California’s independents carries over to their counterparts in swing states.

Who are the independents (in California)? They seem centrist in economic and labor-market perceptions, i.e., in between the two major parties. When asked if they identify with the “Occupy” movement, they also fall in the middle. Sixty-four percent of Democrats said they identify a lot or

² Field Poll data refer to registered voters. The various releases are all at the Field Internet address on page 1 of this musing and available under the link to “archives” at the bottom/left of that webpage.

somewhat with the movement, 45% of independents, and 23% of Republicans.³ But what about social issues?

On such issues, the independents also generally fall in the middle. Fifty-seven percent of Democrats said they favor keeping the California death penalty compared to 70% of independents and 81% of Republicans.⁴ Eighty-two percent of Democrats said they favor the current California “medical” marijuana law, compared to 76% of independents and 61% of Republicans.⁵ Eighty-two percent of Democrats said they agree with the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* abortion decision of 1973, compared with 71% of independents and 54% of Republicans.⁶ On gay marriage, the independents seem to be moving toward the Democrats. In 2010, approval of gay marriage among Democrats, independents, and Republicans was, respectively, 68%-52%-26%. Two years later it was 69%-67%-39%.⁷

Independents were in the middle in “communitarian” values. When asked if the “community” should be involved in reducing obesity, the responses favoring that view came out 86%-71%-56%.⁸ Similarly on environmental issues; when voters were asked if they favored more offshore oil and gas well drilling, the responses were 27%-41%-65%. And when asked if they favored phasing out nuclear power plants, the responses were 47%-42%-26%.⁹

What about “labor” issues, other than the direction of the labor market? Asked if they thought public pensions were too generous in 2011, the Democratic-independent-Republican responses agreeing with that view were 32%-40%-59%. Asked if they favored a law that would combine state deficit reduction with reduced collective bargaining rights for public workers, the voter responses were 28%-35%-66%.¹⁰ At around the time the Obama health plan was under discussion nationally and in Congress, 42% of independents were concerned that employers were cutting back on firm contributions to health insurance. Among Democrats, the concern was 56% versus 32% for Republicans.¹¹

Where do independents obtain their political information? The most important source independents identified when considering the issues on the California ballot was the Internet. Fifty-six percent of independents made that choice compared to 42% of Democrats and 37% of Republicans. Use of the Internet as a primary news source is inversely correlated with age.¹² And as the Appendix shows, a typical independent – compared with the average likely voter – is younger, more likely to be male, more educated, and more likely to be a white/Anglo or Asian than Latino or black. If you believe that such

³ Field release 2395, November 29, 2011.

⁴ Field release 2393, September 29, 2011.

⁵ Field California Opinion Index, September 2010.

⁶ Field release 2350, July 21, 2010.

⁷ Field release 2406, February 29, 2012.

⁸ Field release 2408, April 4, 2012.

⁹ Field release 2380, June 21, 2011.

¹⁰ Field release 2369, March 17, 2011.

¹¹ Field special report, October 22, 2009.

¹² Field California Opinion Index, October 2011.

voters' perceptions of the labor-market are especially important for election outcomes, you should find out what Internet tools will convince them that voting for your candidate will improve their job outlook.

Okay. Up to this point, we have examined how the (macro) labor-market (or perceptions thereof) might influence swing/centrist voters. Now let's ask if what we know about (micro) labor-market practices might teach us something about election processes, particularly as they affect swing voters.

California voters approved two recent electoral reforms that were designed to incentivize candidates for the state legislature and for Congress to appeal to swing voters. One was an elaborate redistricting plan implemented after the 2010 Census which took drawing district lines away from the legislature (dominated by Democrats) and gave that power to a complicated citizens' commission. The notion was that this shift would avoid gerrymandering (by the Democratic majority in the legislature). Minority Republicans, not surprisingly, had pushed for variants of this concept for years – but when it actually happened, they didn't particularly like the results.¹³ In any event, the idea was to create more swing (balanced) districts (which presumably would give the edge to swing voters in such districts). It turned out to be hard to create such swing districts because the political polarization in California tends also to be geographic.

Of greater significance was a change in the primary system from partisan to non-partisan or "top-2." This switch appealed to the longstanding progressive strand in California politics where the word progressive refers to its early 20th century definition, i.e., a movement aimed at weakening political parties. In fact, such primaries have been used locally in California for years. (For example, the mayor of Los Angeles is selected through such a process.) In a top-2 primary, while candidates list their party affiliation (or independent status) on the ballot, *all* candidates regardless of party run in the *same* initial election. Unless one candidate receives a majority, only the top two in the primary run against each other in the general election. (If one candidate receives a majority, there is no general election; that person is elected.) And it is possible that both candidates in the general election will come from the same party.

What was the theory of the top-2 primary? Under a conventional partisan system, each party holds its own primary among its party members. The winners all compete in the subsequent general election. It was argued that in Democratic-leaning districts, only Democratic primary voters really mattered. Similarly, in Republican-leaning districts, only those voters mattered. The outcomes were determined effectively in the primary and reflected the political tastes of the median voter of the dominant party, not the median voter in the district, thus – it was argued - producing partisan extremists, not centrists. Under top-2, in both the primary and general election, everyone votes and so candidates in principle should try and appeal to as many district (not just party) voters they need to win. In short, the top-2

¹³ The November ballot will include an initiative pushed by the state GOP which would repeal the new boundaries but only for the state senate. It seems unlikely to pass since the voters are being asked to undo what they recently did.

primary can be viewed as analogous to an incentive plan that an employer might implement to induce a desired behavior – in this case to be a centrist-appealing candidate.

California had its first primary under this system in early June. Did the incentive work? There was a rush to negative judgment, particularly among those who for one reason or another did not like the new system. This quick verdict is odd and silly because the top-2 system is really a two-election sequence and the November general election has yet to be held. So we don't know what kind of candidate will eventually win or whether there will be the intended result of more centrists emerging as members of the state legislature or the California congressional delegation. That result – if it happens – will be the test of success of the new electoral incentive.

If we view the process as analogous to an employer incentive plan, what can we say at this preliminary stage? When a new incentive plan is put in place in a work setting, it takes time for those workers being given the incentive to figure out what they need to do to come out ahead under the system. As human resources managers will attest, efforts must be made in communicating to employees how the new system works. It takes time and practice to learn. And there may be unanticipated consequences. No new incentive system has outcomes that can be 100% foreseen.

For example, in one Democratic-leaning district, the top-2 candidates who emerged were Republicans (because the various Democrats who ran split the partisan vote and thus didn't come in first or second). In a sense that outcome is anomalous but it doesn't tell us how the two Republicans - who now must compete for Democratic and independent voters in November - will behave. The incentive/goal of the top-2 process was to produce more centrists, not more members of one party or the other. More specifically – it was designed not to ensure that the top-2 primary winners in a Democratic-leaning district would be Democrats.

Over time, however, it is likely that the lesson political parties will learn is that there will need to be some form of party discipline so that the dominant party does not end up splitting the vote to the point where it has no final candidate(s). For the disappointed Democrats who emerged with no candidate in “their” district, one can only point to the old Will Rogers quote: “I don't belong to any organized party; I'm a Democrat.” The lesson for them should be that if you are not organized, what happened in June 2012 will happen again in future primaries. Ironically, a non-partisan primary turns out to create an incentive for greater party discipline.

In short, even after the November 2012 elections under the top-2 system, definitive verdicts should be avoided. The process will mature as experience with it develops. After all, even if the process results in more candidates who made centrist appeals, the ultimate intent of the system is that they should then go forth to the state legislature and to Congress and there behave in a less-polarized fashion than those folks who were elected under the old system. As academics are fond of saying, that is an empirical matter. And as they are even fonder of saying, more research is needed.

Appendix

California voter and party profiles

| | | Likely voters | Likely voter party registration | | | |
|---|----------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|-----|-----|-------|
| | | | Dem | Rep | Ind | Other |
| All likely voters | | – | 44% | 35% | 17% | 4% |
| Ideology | Liberal | 32 | 52 | 8 | 28 | 41 |
| | Middle-of-the-road | 29 | 30 | 21 | 40 | 32 |
| | Conservative | 40 | 18 | 71 | 32 | 27 |
| Strength of affiliation among major party voters | Strong | – | 59 | 57 | – | – |
| | Not very strong | – | 38 | 39 | – | – |
| | Don't know | – | 3 | 4 | – | – |
| Major party leanings among independent voters | Democratic Party | – | – | – | 36 | – |
| | Republican Party | – | – | – | 29 | – |
| | Neither/Don't know | – | – | – | 35 | – |
| Race/Ethnicity | Whites | 65 | 55 | 80 | 62 | 71 |
| | Latinos | 17 | 23 | 10 | 17 | 14 |
| | Asians | 9 | 10 | 7 | 11 | 3 |
| | Blacks | 6 | 10 | 1 | 5 | 3 |
| | Others | 3 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 8 |
| Gender | Men | 48 | 42 | 50 | 57 | 55 |
| | Women | 52 | 58 | 50 | 43 | 45 |
| Education | No college | 19 | 21 | 19 | 15 | 15 |
| | Some college | 37 | 35 | 41 | 33 | 30 |
| | College graduate | 44 | 43 | 40 | 52 | 55 |
| Income | Under \$40,000 | 27 | 32 | 21 | 26 | 32 |
| | \$40,000 to under \$80,000 | 31 | 30 | 34 | 30 | 28 |
| | \$80,000 or more | 41 | 38 | 45 | 44 | 40 |
| Age | 18 to 34 | 19 | 20 | 14 | 27 | 28 |
| | 35 to 54 | 39 | 38 | 39 | 39 | 46 |
| | 55 and older | 42 | 41 | 47 | 34 | 26 |
| Region | Los Angeles | 24 | 29 | 19 | 22 | 20 |
| | SF Bay Area | 22 | 27 | 14 | 27 | 30 |
| | Orange/San Diego | 18 | 13 | 22 | 20 | 15 |
| | Central Valley | 17 | 14 | 21 | 13 | 21 |
| | Inland Empire | 10 | 8 | 13 | 9 | 4 |
| | Other | 10 | 9 | 10 | 9 | 9 |

Notes: Likely voters are registered voters meeting criteria on interest in politics, attention to issues, voting behavior, and intention to vote. For a full description of this criteria, visit <http://www.ppic.org/content/other/SurveyMethodology.pdf>. We gratefully acknowledge the research support of Elisa Baeza.

Source: Ten PPIC Statewide Surveys, September 2010 to July 2011, including 11,322 likely voters.

From: Just the Facts: California Voter and Party Profiles, PPIC, 2011.

Source:

http://www.ppic.org/main/popup.asp?u=../content/images/Table_PartyProfiles.png&t=Table%20-%20Voter%20and%20Party%20Profiles