

Reforming The Recall? California Voters' Perspectives On The Process

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In the wake of California's 2021 gubernatorial recall election, [statewide officials](#), [legislative leaders](#), [columnists](#), and [commentators](#) have called for major reforms to the recall process. But what do ordinary voters think? In this UC San Diego Yankelovich Center Survey, conducted during the week of the recall election with a sample of 2,812 respondents reflective of California's registered voter population, we asked respondents about their participation in and perspectives on the recall election, focusing especially on the process that governed this contest. First, we explore who participated in the recall – including both the question about whether or not to recall Gov. Gavin Newsom as well as the replacement race between candidates – in order to understand the characteristics of these electorates and to see how representative they are of California's voters overall. We ask survey respondents what they thought about the election and not only whether they favor changing the recall but by what process they would like to see reform unfold. Then we ask voters for their preliminary reactions to each of the major reform proposals that have been proposed by policymakers and other reformers. Finally, we ask voters about their perceptions of fraud in the recall election.

A unique feature of our poll is that we collected half of our sample in the two days leading up to the closing of polling places at 8pm on Tuesday, September 14th and half of our sample in the two following days after the results of the recall. These were equally diverse samples collected at the same pace in the two days before and after Californians learned the outcome of the contest. This approach allows us to separate how voters think about the process of the recall from what they think about the outcome; we can look at their initial views of the process and reform before they knew that Gov. Gavin Newsom defeated the recall by a wide margin and that Larry Elder won the most votes in the replacement race. As the sections below explore in greater detail, our key findings are that:

- The recall, and especially the replacement race, were not representative of the full electorate
- Voters' satisfaction with the process depends upon their party and the outcome of the recall
- More voters want to change the recall in 2021 than in 2003, and supporters of making "major changes" to the recall outnumber opponents for every demographic, income, and party group
- Voters back creating a reform commission, but are also open to legislative proposals for reform
- Voters favor many, but not all, proposed reforms
- There is a deep partisan divide over concerns about fraud that grew even wider after the election

ABOUT THIS SURVEY

This report details the key findings from the survey that we conducted on a diverse sample of registered voters in California, focusing on the 2021 recall election. Based on a surveying technique that is now common and [well-vetted](#), it includes a sample of 2,812 respondents, drawn to reflect California's voting age population along the lines of race, ethnicity, age, and gender, using the online Luc.id Fulcrum platform. This sample was targeted based

on the characteristics of the state's citizen voting age population from the 2019 American Community Survey. All respondents in the survey reported being registered voters. We conducted this survey from September 13-16, 2021, with 1,429 completing the survey on Monday the 13th and before 8pm on Tuesday the 14th – when the first recall results were announced – and the remaining 1,383 completing it on Wednesday the 16th and Thursday the 17th, when the results had been widely reported. The margin of error on this survey is plus or minus 2%.

THE RECALL, AND ESPECIALLY THE REPLACEMENT RACE, WERE NOT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE FULL ELECTORATE

One concern voiced by proponents of reforming the recall process is that the set of voters taking part in these consequential elections may not be broadly reflective of California's usual electorate. When contests are held in off-cycle years, turnout may be lower than in other gubernatorial elections. Perhaps most concerning, turnout in recalls may be not only small but uneven, leaving out key segments of the state's population as only a narrower group of voters participates. The New York Times editorial board [voiced this concern](#) recently, citing [recent research](#) co-authored by Yankelovich Center co-director Zoltan Hajnal showing that “Voters in off-cycle elections generally skew older, whiter, and more conservative.”

Was this the case in the 2021 recall? Initial data at the aggregate level shows that [55% of registered voters participated](#) in the recall election overall, compared with the [65% who took part](#) in the last governor's race held in November, 2018. Perhaps most concerning is that, among the 9.5 million ballots counted so far, 45% of the voters who participated in the recall overall did not cast a ballot in the replacement race, bringing the effective turnout rate for that race down to 31% of registered voters.

Yet while overall turnout figures can tell us *how many* voters took part in the recall, they cannot tell us *who* participated. Analyzing our Yankelovich Center Survey – which asked registered voters whether they cast a ballot on the recall question and, separately, in the candidate replacement race as well as in the 2020 presidential election – allows us to look at the characteristics of each electorate and to see if they are representative of California's population of registered voters. What this analysis shows is that voters in the recall election, especially those in the candidate replacement rate, were more likely to be white, to be wealthy, to be older, and to affiliate with the Republican Party than California's overall electorate.

The table below presents complete data on the key characteristics of the registered voters in our sample overall in the first column, those who reported voting in the 2020 presidential election in the second column, those who voted on the Yes/No recall question in the third column, and those who cast a vote on the candidate replacement race in the fourth. Each electorate is smaller than the last, with the largest drop-off in participation coming in the replacement race. The table also demonstrates that the racial and ethnic composition, age, income levels, and especially partisanship are different in each shrinking electorate. In our full sample of registered voters, 36% are white and 39% Latino. In the recall replacement race, non-Hispanic whites rose to 41% of the electorate with Latinos still only 39%. Black voters and Asian-American voters were underrepresented in the candidate replacement race by one and two percentage points, respectively. Voters under age 45 composed 49% of the full electorate but only 45% of the replacement race electorate. Voters with incomes under \$50,000 a year were 43% of the total electorate but only 39% of the replacement race electorate, while those making incomes of \$100,000 or more were 24% of the total electorate but 30% of the replacement race. That contest featured more Republican voters than Democrats, even though Democrats outnumber Republicans by a 2-1 margin in our sample as in the [state overall](#).

	Total Registered Voters in Survey	Voted in Presidential Election	Voted on Yes/No Recall Question	Voted in Recall Replacement Race
# of Respondents	2,812	2,572	2,427	1,348
Race/Ethnicity				
White (non-Hispanic)	36.3%	37.6%	38.2%	40.9%
Latino	39.4%	38.8%	38.5%	39.0%
Black Voters	5.5%	5.5%	5.3%	4.4%
Asian-American	14.6%	14.2%	14.2%	12.3%
Other	4.1%	3.9%	3.9%	3.3%
Age				
18-24	12.0%	11.4%	11.0%	11.2%
25-44	37.0%	35.6%	35.3%	34.9%
45-64	20.0%	32.3%	32.6%	32.8%
65+	19.0%	20.6%	21.1%	21.0%
Household Income				
Under \$25,000	21.7%	21.5%	20.8%	19.3%
\$25,000 to \$49,999	21.1%	20.5%	20.5%	19.3%
\$50,000 to \$74,999	16.8%	17.8%	17.8%	16.9%
\$75,000 to \$99,999	12.6%	13.6%	13.6%	14.5%
\$100,000 to \$149,999	13.6%	14.7%	15.3%	15.7%
Over \$150,000	10.8%	11.9%	12.0%	14.3%
Partisan Affiliation				
Democrat	51.4%	52.6%	52.0%	36.6%
Republican	25.5%	26.4%	26.5%	39.3%
Independent or Other	23.2%	20.9%	21.5%	24.1%

2,812 Registered California Voters

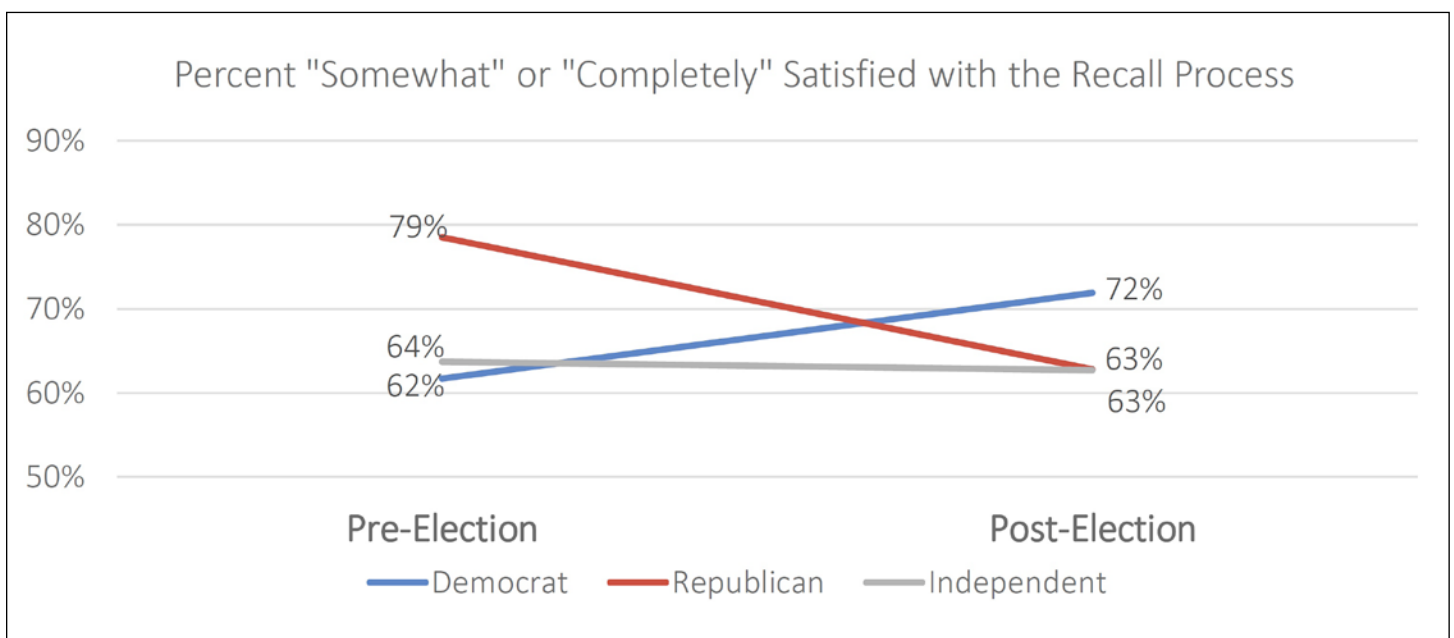
VOTERS' SATISFACTION WITH THE PROCESS DEPENDS UPON THEIR PARTY AND THE OUTCOME OF THE RECALL

The first question we asked on our survey was “Regardless of what you think about the outcome of the governor’s recall election held this year, how satisfied are you with the way the recall process works in California?” Looking at our full sample collected over four days, 27% of respondents were very satisfied, 40% somewhat satisfied, 18% not too satisfied, and 15% not at all satisfied. This overall level of satisfaction with the process varies by party, as the first section of the table below shows. Overall, 66% of Democrats were somewhat or very satisfied, compared with 71% of Republicans but only 63% of Independents (a group which includes those with no party preference and those who support minor parties). However, as the remainder of the table and the graph below shows, perspectives on the recall process were strongly influenced by the outcome of the election itself. Before the results were known, only 62% of Democrats were somewhat or very satisfied with the process, but this increased to 72% among those surveyed on the Wednesday and Thursday after the strong defeat of the recall was announced. Among Republicans, satisfaction with the process plummeted from 79% in the sample collected before 8pm on Tuesday night to 63% afterward. The views of Independents remained quite constant, with 64% before and 63% afterward responding that they were somewhat or very satisfied.

“Regardless of what you think about the outcome of the governor’s recall election held this year, how satisfied are you with the way the recall process works in California?”

	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Not Too Satisfied	Not at all Satisfied
Full Sample	27.0%	40.0%	17.9%	15.1%
Democrat	30.7%	35.7%	17.9%	15.7%
Republican	26.3%	44.7%	13.6%	15.5%
Independent	22.0%	41.2%	22.8%	14.0%
Pre-Election (1,429 respondents)				
Total	25.2%	41.4%	18.4%	15.0%
Democrat	26.2%	35.5%	20.2%	18.2%
Republican	29.8%	48.7%	10.0%	11.5%
Independent	19.9%	43.8%	23.8%	12.5%
Post-Election (1,383 respondents)				
Total	29.0%	38.3%	17.3%	15.3%
Democrat	36.0%	35.9%	15.3%	12.8%
Republican	22.5%	40.3%	17.4%	19.8%
Independent	24.4%	38.3%	21.5%	15.8%
Over \$150,000	10.8%	11.9%	12.0%	14.3%

2,812 Registered California Voters



MORE VOTERS WANT TO CHANGE THE RECALL IN 2021 THAN IN 2003, THOUGH SUPPORT FOR KEEPING SOME VERSION OF THE RECALL IN THE FUTURE REMAINS STRONG

Overall, a quarter of Californians were “very satisfied” with the recall process before the election and 29% afterward; a third responded that they were “Not too satisfied” or “Not at all satisfied” before just as 33% also responded this way afterward. Do these figures mean that Californians demand reform? To determine whether there is public appetite for reform, it is important to find bases of comparison for how they viewed the 2021 election. One clear point of comparison is the only other gubernatorial recall election ever held in California, the October 2003 race that replaced Gov. Gray Davis with Arnold Schwarzenegger. During that contest, the Public Policy Institute of California conducted a [September statewide survey](#) that asked respondents whether they thought the recall needed major changes, minor changes, or whether it is “basically okay the way it is.” We repeated this question on our September 2021 Yankelovich Center Survey. Californians’ support for reform has risen. Today, 40% of the state’s registered voters believe that the recall process needs major reform, compared with 34% of likely voters in 2003. Support for minor changes also grew from 24% to 28%. Total support for either major or minor changes has risen by ten points, with the percentage viewing the process as okay the way it is falling from 35% to 24%.

Generally speaking, and regardless of how you feel about this year’s election, do you think the recall election process needs major changes, minor changes, or is it basically okay the way it is?

	September 2003 PPIC Statewide Survey	September 2021 Yankelovich Center Survey
Needs Major Changes	34%	40%
Needs Minor Changes	24%	28%
Okay the way it is	35%	24%
Don’t know	7%	8%

Another basis of comparison to determine how registered voters view the recall process is to set it against the typical process of choosing a governor in California. When we asked this question, half of respondents viewed a typical election as a better way to pick the next governor, while only one in five favored the recall process.

“Comparing this year’s recall election to a typical election to choose a governor in California, do you feel that:”

The recall process is a better way to choose the next	20%
The two processes are about the same	30%
A typical election is a better way to choose the next governor	50%

Still, support remains strong to preserve some version of the recall process in the state’s constitution. Asked whether recalls should be allowed in the future, nearly three quarters of respondents agreed, though a surprisingly large 27% of registered voters did favor removing the recall from our state constitution.

Regardless of how you feel about the outcome of this year’s election, do you feel that the recall should continue to be allowed under our state constitution?

Yes, continue to allow recalls in the future	73%
No, remove the recall from our state constitution	27%

VOTERS BACK THE CREATION OF A REFORM COMMISSION, BUT ARE ALSO OPEN TO LEGISLATIVE PROPOSALS FOR REFORM

Before asking respondents about specific ideas for changing the recall process, we posed two questions asking them about how they would like to see any reform process unfold. Because nearly all of the key provisions governing the recall process are enshrined in our state constitution, it would take a majority vote in favor of constitutional change in an upcoming general election in order to alter that process. Such a move would have to be initiated by the state legislature, with the two most plausible paths to reform being either: a. one or more Legislative Constitutional Amendments proposed directly by lawmakers to the voters through a [2/3 vote in each legislative house](#), or b. the legislature convening a Constitutional Revision Commission to propose ideas, which would then also need 2/3 support in each house and majority approval by voters.

To determine voter support for initiating a significant reform process, we began by asking whether voters would support the creation of an independent commission to submit proposals to voters. More than half would support this, compared with the 29% who said they would oppose it.

“Do you think that the state legislature should create an independent commission that would consider changes to the recall process and submit proposals to voters in the November, 2022 election?”

Yes, create a commission to consider recall changes	52%
No, do not create a commission to consider recall changes	29%
Don't know	19%

Of course, voters might support the creation of a commission making proposals to voters simply because they want to see major reform and to have a voice in it, not because they prefer a commission to proposals submitted by the legislature. To determine whether they have a preference for either process, we conducted a split sample survey experiment in which we asked half of our respondents (chosen at random) how supportive they would be of major changes proposed by an independent commission, asking the other half about major changes proposed by the state legislature. If one of the phrasings led to greater support, this would indicate a public preference for that process. Yet we found no significant difference – by about a 2-1 margin, voters said that they would be likely rather than unlikely to support major reforms (with many undecided voters), a margin that did not differ whether the proposals came from an independent commission or from the state legislature.

If (the state legislature/an independent commission) proposed a set of major changes to the recall process, how likely would you be to support them?

	“If the state legislature...”	“If an independent commission...”
Likely to support major changes to the recall process	46%	47%
Not likely to support the changes to the recall process	23%	23%
Don't know	30%	30%

The table below breaks down responses to this key question about support for major changes to the recall process by demographic groups, income, partisanship, ideology and the region in which respondents live. (Because responses did not vary significantly with the question phrasing, we include all respondents from both “split halves” of the survey in the table below.) While there are some important differences across groups, the striking message of this table is how strongly the prospect of making “major changes to the recall process” is supported across the board. There is no group in which those who are “not likely to support major changes” outnumbered those who were

“likely.” Democrats and Independents are the most supportive of making changes, but even among Republicans and those describing themselves as conservative, there is slightly more support for major reform than opposition.

Registered voters in every region of the state, including the Central Valley and parts of Northern California outside the Bay Area, support major changes by at least a 16-point margin. There is no sharp gender gap and few differences across racial and ethnic groups, though Latino and Black registered voters are the most supportive of reform. So are younger respondents and the most well-off. Still, the pattern here is that all groups of registered voters, to varying degrees, favor reform.

If (the state legislature/an independent commission) proposed a set of major changes to the recall process, how likely would you be to support them?

	Likely to support major changes to the recall process	Not likely to support major changes to the recall process	Don't know
Total Percent	46.8%	23.0%	30.2%
Partisan Affiliation			
Democrat	55.4%	16.1%	28.4%
Republican	36.4%	35.8%	27.8%
Independent	42.7%	23.5%	33.8%
Political Ideology			
Liberal	57.8%	16.2%	26.1%
Moderate	41.6%	22.5%	35.9%
Conservative	35.6%	35.3%	29.2%
Political Ideology			
Los Angeles	50.2%	24.3%	25.4%
San Diego/Orange Counties	40.0%	23.0%	36.9%
Other Southern California	48.3%	22.7%	29.0%
Bay Area	51.7%	19.0%	29.3%
Central Valley	40.9%	24.8%	34.3%
Other Northern California	46.7%	24.6%	28.7%
Gender			
Male	49.5%	26.3%	24.2%
Female	44.2%	19.8%	36.0%
Race/Ethnicity			
White (non-Hispanic)	46.3%	21.8%	31.9%
Latino	48.8%	24.0%	27.2%
Black Voters	48.7%	22.5%	28.9%
Asian-American	44.6%	22.9%	32.6%
Other	37.8%	25.5%	36.6%
Age			
18-24	48.9%	23.2%	27.9%
25-44	53.3%	21.2%	25.5%
45-64	43.2%	24.8%	31.9%
65+	38.9%	23.2%	37.9%
Household Income			
Under \$25,000	46.3%	22.6%	31.1%
\$25,000 to \$49,999	42.6%	23.4%	34.0%
\$50,000 to \$74,999	42.5%	26.8%	30.8%
\$75,000 to \$99,999	46.3%	24.9%	28.8%
\$100,000 to \$149,999	52.3%	22.1%	25.5%
Over \$150,000	59.9%	18.4%	21.7%

VOTERS FAVOR MANY, BUT NOT ALL, PROPOSED REFORMS

What specific reforms would voters support? We asked registered voters about their preliminary reactions to the major ideas for changing the process that we have seen in circulation, including those already advanced through the legislative process and those that have been recently proposed. A major caveat is that these are voters' initial reactions to complex proposals. To avoid making any arguments in the question wording, there is no rationale spelled out for any of the proposals, leading respondents to determine for themselves how these mechanisms might advance larger principles. And as we report, many voters say at this time that they don't know what position they would take. These ideas are simply proposed, without listing any pro or con arguments (which is especially important, given that one of the authors of this report is [on record](#) favoring certain reforms). Finally, since most reforms – other than the change to signature gathering that is currently proposed in [Senate Bill 660](#) – would require constitutional amendments, the questions explicitly state this high threshold to provide the closest possible analogy to what voters will consider if a constitutional amendment is placed before them on a future ballot.

Below, we report the responses to each reform. Many of these ideas have strong initial support. For instance, two-thirds of respondents support limiting the grounds for any recall to reasons such as “concerns about corruption or criminal acts,” and only 26% oppose the idea. While there was a partisan divide over this proposal – 76% of Democrats supported it, compared with 61% of Independents and 52% of Republicans – it still had majority support in each of these groups. Respondents strongly favored increasing the signature threshold required to call a recall from 12 percent of the electorate to 20 percent, with 54% of registered voters supporting this idea versus 35% opposing it.

California’s constitution states that “Recall is the power of the electors to remove an elective officer,” but does not specify the reasons for removal. Would you support a constitutional amendment specifying the reasons – such as concerns about corruption or criminal acts – that would be required to justify any recall?

Yes, I'd support specifying the reasons required to justify any recall	66%
No, I would keep the constitution as it is	26%
Don't know	8%

California’s constitution requires recall organizers to collect signatures equal to 12% of the votes cast in the last governor’s election. Would you support a constitutional amendment to increase this signature threshold to a higher level, such as 20%, to hold a recall election?

Yes, I'd support increasing the signatures required to hold a recall election to 20%	54%
No, I would keep the constitution as it is	35%
Don't know	11%

A more narrow majority (48% versus 37%) backed the overall concept of changing the way the recall replacement race works. When given specific ideas for that race, a strong 53% versus 33% majority backed having a run-off between the top two candidates and by a 47% versus 37% margin respondents backed holding a replacement race only if the recall is successful. The parties sharply diverged on this idea, with Democrats backing it by a 61% to 25% margin and Independents supporting it by 49% to 35%, but Republicans opposing it, 56% to 34%. On the question of whether the lieutenant governor should automatically become the next governor after a successful recall, 43% of registered voters would support the change and 41% would oppose it.

California’s constitution states that a majority vote – 50% plus one – of those casting a ballot in a recall election is required to remove the officeholder facing the recall. If a recall is successful, then the officeholder will be replaced by the candidate who wins a plurality – the most votes of any candidate – in the replacement election. Would you support a constitutional amendment to change the process for electing the replacement for any recalled officeholder?

Yes, I’d support changing the process for electing the replacement for any recalled officeholder	48%
No, I would keep the constitution as it is	37%
Don’t know	15%

Would you support a constitutional amendment requiring that whenever a recall is successful, there will be a run-off election between the top two candidates in the replacement election, with the winner being the candidate who wins a majority of the vote in that run-off election?

Yes, I’d support requiring a run-off between the top two candidates in the replacement election, if a recall is successful	53%
No, I would keep the constitution as it is	33%
Don’t know	14%

Would you support a constitutional amendment separating the recall and replacement elections? The first election would ask voters whether or not to recall an officeholder, and a second replacement election would be held only if the recall is successful.

Yes, I’d support separating the recall and replacement elections	49%
No, I would keep the constitution as it is	37%
Don’t know	15%

Would you support a constitutional amendment requiring that whenever a recall of a governor is successful, that the lieutenant governor would automatically become the next governor?

Yes, I’d support replacing any governor who is recalled with the lieutenant governor	43%
No, I would keep the constitution as it is	41%
Don’t know	16%

Two constitutional reforms were clearly unpopular in this survey, with fewer than four in ten respondents favoring each of them and 46% saying that they would keep the constitution as it is. The first is the proposal to delay any recall election qualifying for the ballot during an odd year until the next regularly scheduled election in an even year. The second is the proposal to allow an officeholder facing a recall to run in the replacement election. By contrast, there was strong support for legislation prohibiting payments made per signature to those gathering signatures for recalls, initiatives, and referendums, instead allowing only hourly or salary payments to those who gather signatures, which was supported by a 51% to 32% margin.

Would you support a constitutional amendment that would delay any recall election qualifying for the ballot during an odd year until the next regularly scheduled election in an even year?

Yes, I’d support delaying any recall until the next regularly scheduled election in an even year	36%
No, I would keep the constitution as it is	46%
Don’t know	19%

California’s constitution prohibits any officeholder facing a recall from running in the replacement election. Would you support a constitutional amendment that would allow an officeholder facing a recall to run in the replacement election?

Yes, I’d support allowing an officeholder facing a recall to run in the replacement	39%
No, I would keep the constitution as it is	46%
Don’t know	16%

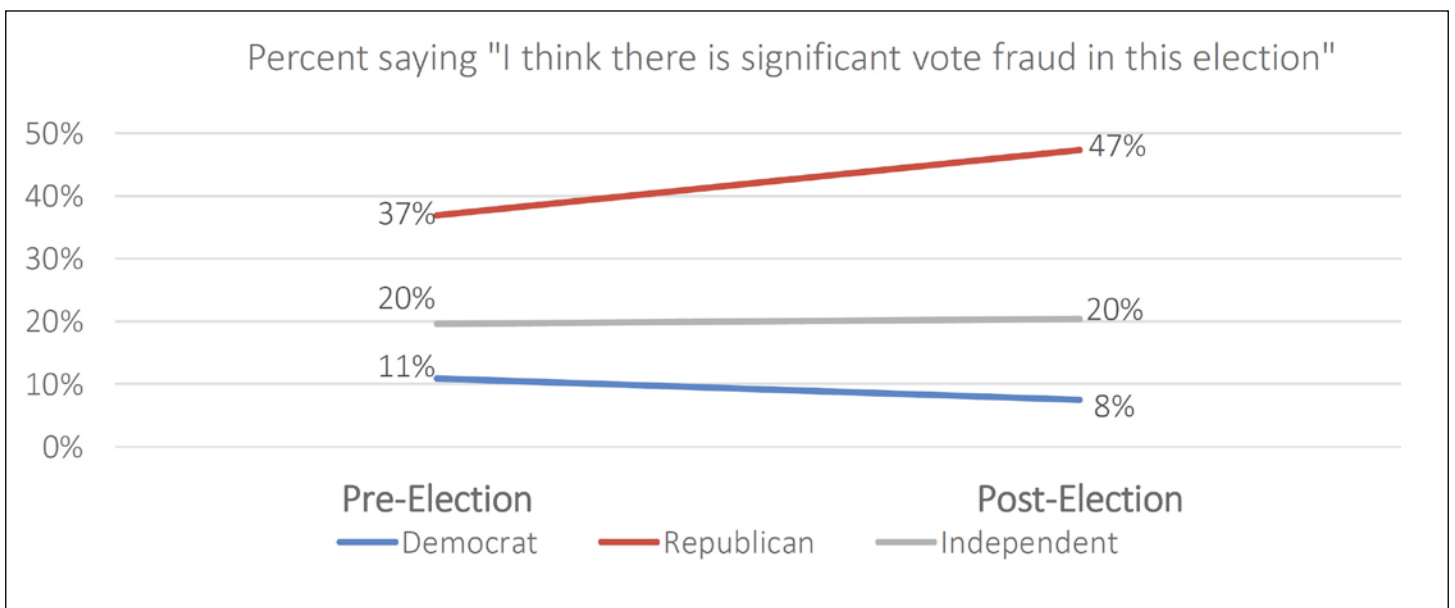
Would you support legislation that prohibits payments made per signature to those gathering signatures for recalls, initiatives, and referendums, instead allowing only hourly or salary payments to those who gather signatures?

Yes, I’d support prohibiting payments per signature and only allowing hourly or salary payments	51%
No, I would keep the law as it is	32%
Don’t know	17%

THERE IS A DEEP PARTISAN DIVIDE OVER CONCERNS ABOUT FRAUD, WITH THE GAP WIDENING SIGNIFICANTLY AFTER THE ELECTION

Even before voting in the recall election concluded and any results were reported, a [website funded by Republican candidate Larry Elder’s campaign](#) claimed that “statistical analyses used to detect fraud in elections held in 3rd-world nations (such as Russia, Venezuela, and Iran) have detected fraud in California resulting in Governor Gavin Newsom being reinstated as governor.” Donald [Trump also charged](#) that the election was “rigged.” To gauge voter perceptions about fraud, we asked respondents the question below. We break down the results by party and for the samples collected before and after the election results were first announced on the evening of Tuesday, September 14.

Overall, 20% of California’s registered voters think that there is significant fraud in this election, 59% trust that the election results accurately reflect the vote and 21% don’t know. Yet this overall view masks a sharp partisan divide that only grew larger once the election concluded and the results showing that the recall was defeated by a wide margin were reported. Before Election Night, 11% of Democrats, 20% of Independents, and 37% of Republicans thought that there was significant vote fraud. After the election, belief that there was fraud declined to 8% among Democrats, remained steady at 20% among Independents, but rose to 47% among Republicans.



Do you trust that the recall election results accurately reflect the vote, or do you think there is significant vote fraud in this election?

	I think there is significant vote fraud in this election	I trust that the recall election results accurately reflect the vote	Don't Know
Full Sample	20.4%	59.0%	20.6%
Partisan Affiliation			
Democrat	9.3%	74.1%	16.6%
Republican	41.9%	38.4%	19.7%
Independent	20.0%	54.4%	25.7%
Pre-Election (1,429 respondents)			
Total	19.6%	56.3%	24.2%
Democrat	10.9%	67.5%	21.6%
Republican	36.9%	40.6%	22.5%
Independent	19.6%	53.3%	27.1%
Other Northern California	46.7%	24.6%	28.7%
Post-Election (1,383 respondents)			
Total	21.3%	62.2%	16.5%
Democrat	7.5%	81.8%	10.7%
Republican	47.3%	36.1%	16.6%
Independent	20.4%	55.6%	24.0%

2,812 Registered California Voters