

FINDING CONSENSUS IN A PARTISAN WORLD

Key findings of a statewide survey of California voters

*Lead Researchers:
Val Smith, Ph.D.
Ben Tulchin*

*Associate Researchers:
Bereket Kelile
Kiel Brunner*

This survey of California likely 2016 voters was
commissioned by:

Institute for Advanced Technology & Public Policy
At Cal Poly San Luis Obispo

Jointly conducted by:



Executive Summary

Against a backdrop of polarized views on California's general direction, the public shows strong bipartisan support for legislative reforms that make government more transparent and accessible. California voters want to know more about the relationship between special interest groups and their elected officials. They also want to see greater transparency in the way the Legislature conducts its business, including disclosures about how legislative members spend their tax dollars and making sure state government documents are easily accessible and searchable online.

Support for the proposed reforms was uniform across the partisan and ideological spectra. Importantly, the popularity of these reforms was not just superficial, but survived well-formed opposition arguments.

While the survey indicated broad and deep support for the reforms, a number of other conclusions could be drawn from the data, as well;

- Voters were evenly split on whether California is moving in the right direction; however, opinions were heavily influenced by partisan leanings. Democrats tended to believe the state is doing well, whereas Republicans were pessimistic.
- The overwhelming majority of voters believed that legislative reforms requiring improved transparency and accountability were justified.
- Of the three reform categories tested, "tracking influential interest groups" was viewed as most important.
- Between eight-in-ten and nine-in-ten respondents favored a list of specific changes for the California State Legislature.
- When reforms were tested in a debate format with both pro and con arguments presented, the reforms withstood opposition arguments very well.
- When support for reforms was visually superimposed over the top of the debates, levels of support showed some drop-off, but the debate margins remained strong at between 35% and 48%. The strongest debate margin was for searchable documents.

Right Direction – Wrong Track

A common gauge of political attitudes is the question of whether a state is moving in the right direction or off on the wrong track. California voters were split on the question at 44% on either side of the issue. The remaining 12% were undecided.

But not every demographic or psychographic group was evenly divided. The following graph shows that loyal Republicans overwhelmingly believed that the state is off on the wrong track (76%). Loyal Democrats were comfortable with the direction the state has taken (63%). Switch voters were split at 43% positive and 48% negative.

Would you say things in California are going in the right direction, or would you say that things are pretty seriously off on the wrong track?

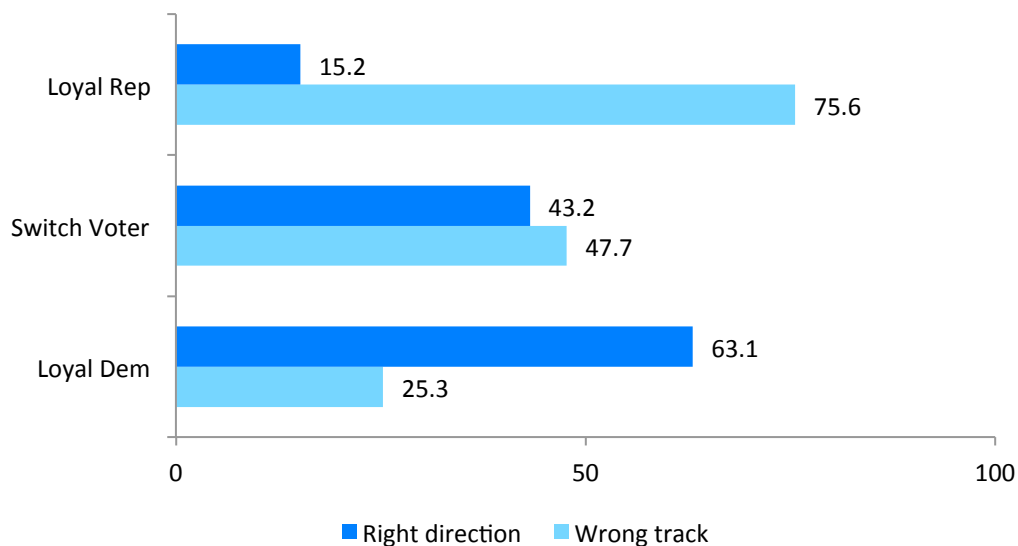


Figure 1. Right direction/Wrong track by Party loyalty

Transparency and Accountability

California voters are demanding more accountability and transparency from their state government, with accountability perceived as a slightly higher value than transparency. Eighty-three percent of the respondents said that accountability represented at least some need, compared to 78% for transparency. Both objectives, however, were supported by a large majority.

In your opinion, how much need is there to reform state government to make it more open and transparent? Is that a great need, some need, a little or no need?

In your opinion, how much need is there to reform state government to make it easier to hold lawmakers accountable? Is that a great need, some need, a little or no need?

Response	Need for transparency	Need for accountability
A great need	45.3	58.2
Some need	32.4	24.4
Total great + some need	77.7	82.6
A little need	14.1	9.4
No need	5.8	5.7
Undecided	2.3	2.1

Table 1. Need for transparency & accountability

Reform Importance

The next sequence of questions recasts the reforms in more detail, focusing on three objectives: accessible information about interest groups who support a law, campaign contributions to elected officials, and the status of a bill and its voting record. All three of these reforms were viewed as overwhelmingly positive. The strongest support came for making it easier to follow the actions and motives of interest groups.

In your opinion, how important is it for the State Legislature to provide the following - extremely important, very important, somewhat important, not too important or not at all important?

- *Making it easy to know which interest groups are behind a proposed law*
- *Making it easy to know how much money interest groups donate to elected officials*
- *Making it easy to follow how a proposed law gets voted on and drafted*

(“Extremely important” and “Very important” were scored as positive and the remaining three response options were scored as negative.)

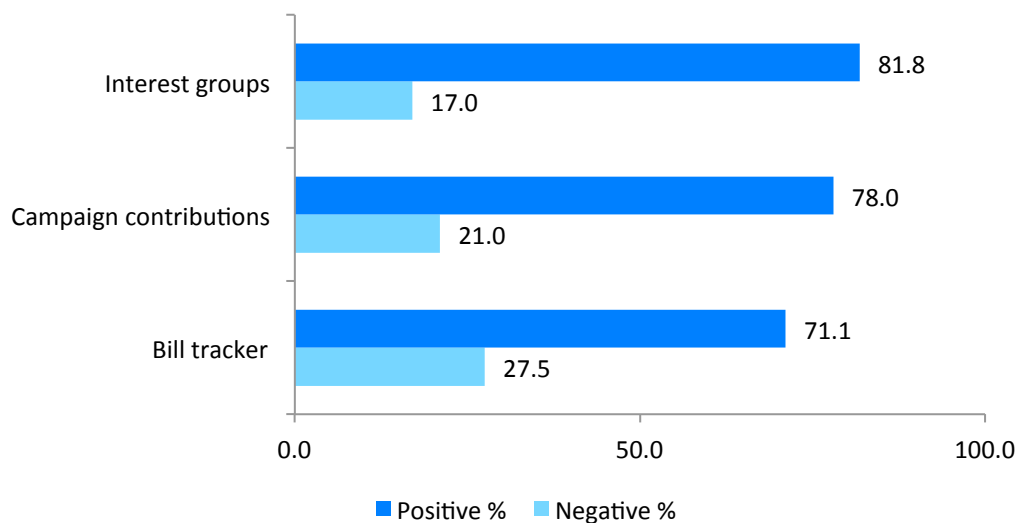


Figure 2. Reform Importance Block

Reform Support

The survey asked voters about a series of specific reform proposals intended to make state government, especially the State Legislature, more transparent and accountable. For most of the reforms the percentage of support approached or exceeded 90%. The highest level of support was for searchable documents (91%). The four other proposals all received similarly high levels of support, though enthusiasm was relatively lower though still strong for requiring analysis of proposed new laws to come from the non-partisan Legislative Analyst's Office instead of legislative staff (82%).

A number of specific changes for the California State Legislature have been proposed. Please listen to a brief description of each and tell me if you support or oppose that change. IF SUPPORT/OPPOSE Do you strongly SUPPORT/OPPOSE or somewhat SUPPORT/OPPOSE that?

- **Searchable Documents:** Requiring all documents, including the state budget, be available online with their content easily searchable with a search engine similar Google
- **Legislative Spending:** Providing a detailed quarterly report of all legislative spending, including travel, staff, perks, mailings and committees
- **72 Hour Wait Period:** Requiring proposed new laws to be made available to the public in writing at least 72 hours before a final vote is taken
- **Video Recording:** Requiring all public hearings in the Legislature to be video recorded and made available to the public on the Internet within 24 hours after the hearing
- **LAO Analysis:** Requiring that the official analysis of proposed new laws be done by the Legislative Analyst's Office who provides non-partisan analysis, instead of legislative staff

(“Strongly support” and “Somewhat support” were scored as positive. Both “Strongly oppose” and “Somewhat oppose” were scored as negative. “Undecided” was scored as neutral and is not reflected in the graph.)

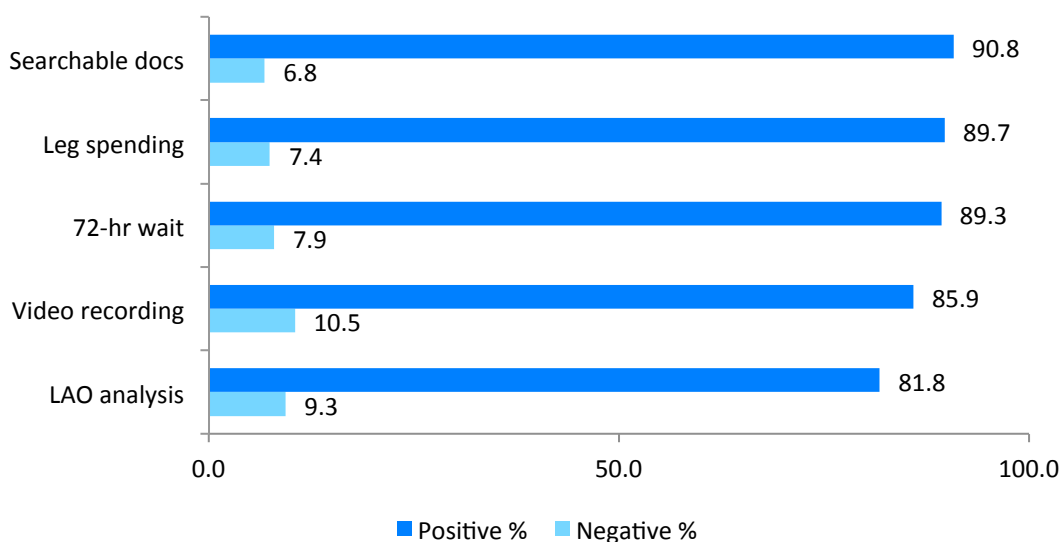


Figure 3. Reform Support Block

Reform Debate

Respondents listened to arguments for and against several proposed reforms and were asked whether they agreed with the supporters or opponents. Below is the full text of the questions we asked with the pro and con arguments we presented:

- **Searchable Documents:** *One proposal would require that all documents, including the state budget, be made available online. Supporters say it is time for California state government to enter the 21st century and make available all documents online so that the contents may be easily searchable by the public through an online search engine similar to Google. This would make government more transparent, allow the public to know more about what is going on, and consequently hold politicians more accountable.*

Opponents say most important documents such as the state budget are already available online. This proposal would require an unnecessary amount of bureaucratic work, at a high cost, and may not even be feasible.

- **Legislative Spending:** *One proposal would require a detailed quarterly report of all legislative spending, including for travel, office staff, perks, mailings and committees. Supporters say that the California Legislature ranks last in budget transparency, and spends 250 million dollars a year on its own activities with little public disclosure or accountability.*

Opponents say that this is an unnecessary requirement. Both the Senate and Assembly leadership already provide spending reports that are available to the public. Requiring yet another report would cost taxpayers money and provide little additional benefit.

- **72 Hour Wait Period:** *One idea would require that proposed new laws be made available in writing for the public at least 72 hours before the final vote. Supporters say that controversial bills are often quickly changed to please special interests, then put up for a vote with little or no time for the press, the public, and even other legislators to properly review what the bill says.*

Opponents say that it's important that legislators be able to debate and work out reasonable compromises right up until the final vote, and that freezing the language 3 days before a vote will just increase gridlock.

- **Video Recording:** *One proposal would require that all public hearings in the California Legislature be video recorded and made available to the public on the Internet within 24 hours after the hearing. Supporters say that, currently, many hearings are not recorded, and that they don't even keep minutes of these meetings. Recording these hearings keeps government more open, and the public informed.*

Opponents say that the Legislature already records many of the hearings which can be seen on a public website. A legal requirement to record all hearings, many of which will never be watched, just creates more unnecessary and costly bureaucracy.

- **LAO Analysis:** *One idea would require that the official analysis of proposed new laws be done by the Legislative Analyst's Office, instead of legislative staff. Supporters say that currently these analyses are performed by partisan staff members who work for politicians whereas the Legislative Analyst is non-partisan and has a proven record of being independent.*

Opponents say that the staff who analyze proposed laws have long years of experience doing this work. It is better to have staff who are responsible to legislators elected by the people than have unelected bureaucrats doing it. This measure is seeking to solve a problem that doesn't exist.

One hypothesis going into this survey was that support for reforms would be high when considered in isolation, but that support would substantially erode when respondents were read opposing arguments. To test that hypothesis opposing arguments were matched with each of the reforms.

The hypothesis was not confirmed. Levels of support did drop in every case, but only by a small degree as fully two-thirds of voters remained supportive of nearly all of the proposals with opposition rising only slightly. And this was giving the opposition the benefit of the doubt. For example, volunteered responses such as “I’m still undecided” or “Neither side won” were scored as negative index values. For example, volunteered responses such as “Agree with opponents,” “I’m still undecided,” or “Neither side won” were scored as negative percentages. “Agree with supporters” was scored as a positive percentage.

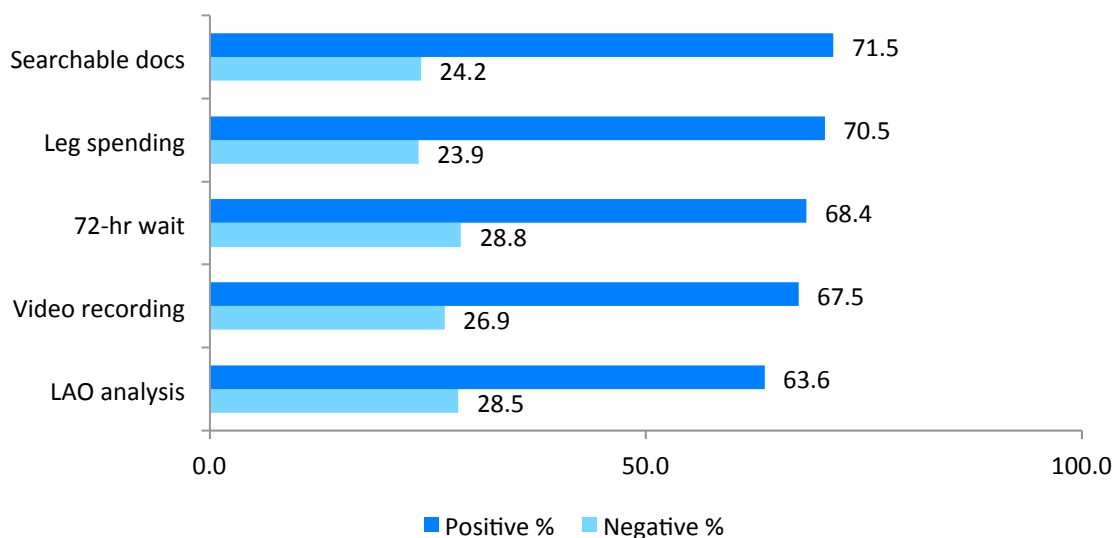


Figure 4. Reform Debate Block

Perhaps more importantly, support levels remained relatively constant across ideological, age, ethnic, geographic, gender and partisan groupings. The following graphs illustrate the breadth of support for one of the reform proposals, the “72 hours in writing.”

This reform would require that a proposed law must be available in writing to legislators and the public at least 72 hours before a vote is taken. Similar results were found across-the-board for the other reform proposals, suggesting that the public’s appetite for accountability and transparency in government reflect broadly held common social values.

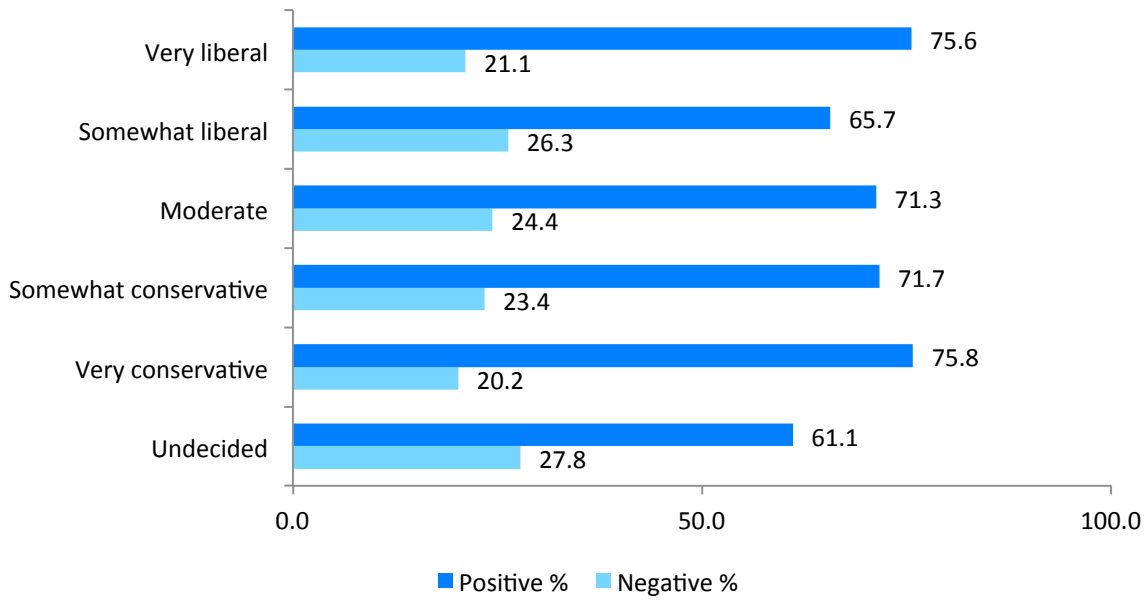


Figure 5. “72 hours in writing” by Ideology

All age groups supported the reform with large margins and those between ages 35-44 showed markedly higher support with 85% voting in favor.

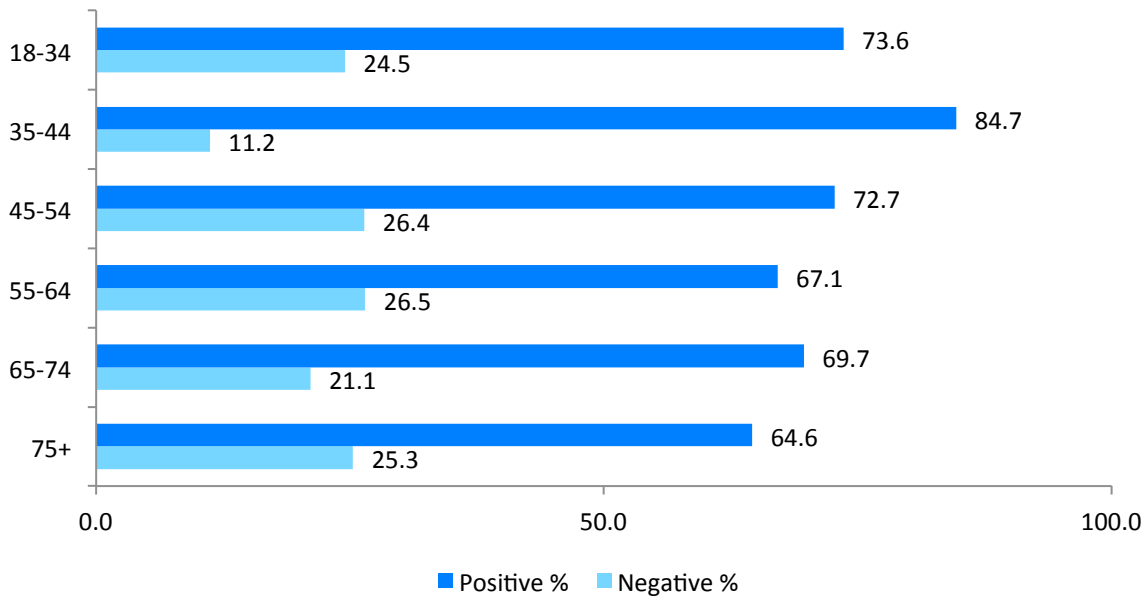


Figure 6. “72 hours in writing” by Age

Support for the measure cut across ethnic lines. No less than 70% of California voters of all backgrounds supported the reform.

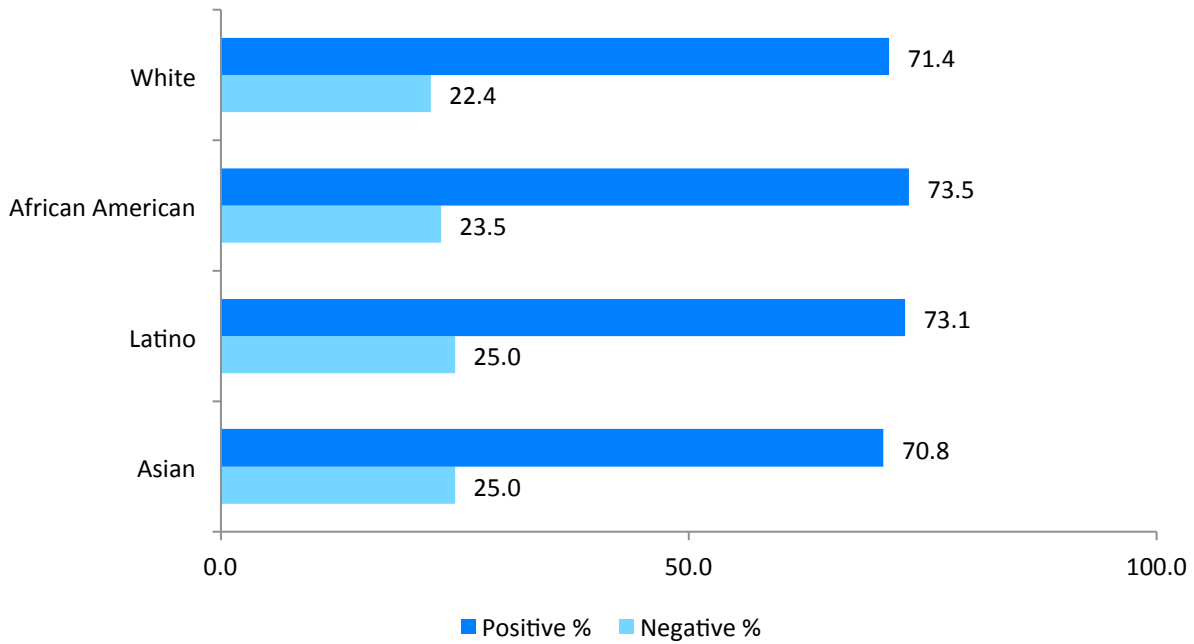


Figure 7. “72 hours in writing” by Ethnicity

Support for the reform was also consistent up and down the state. Region was not a predictor of support for the proposed reforms.

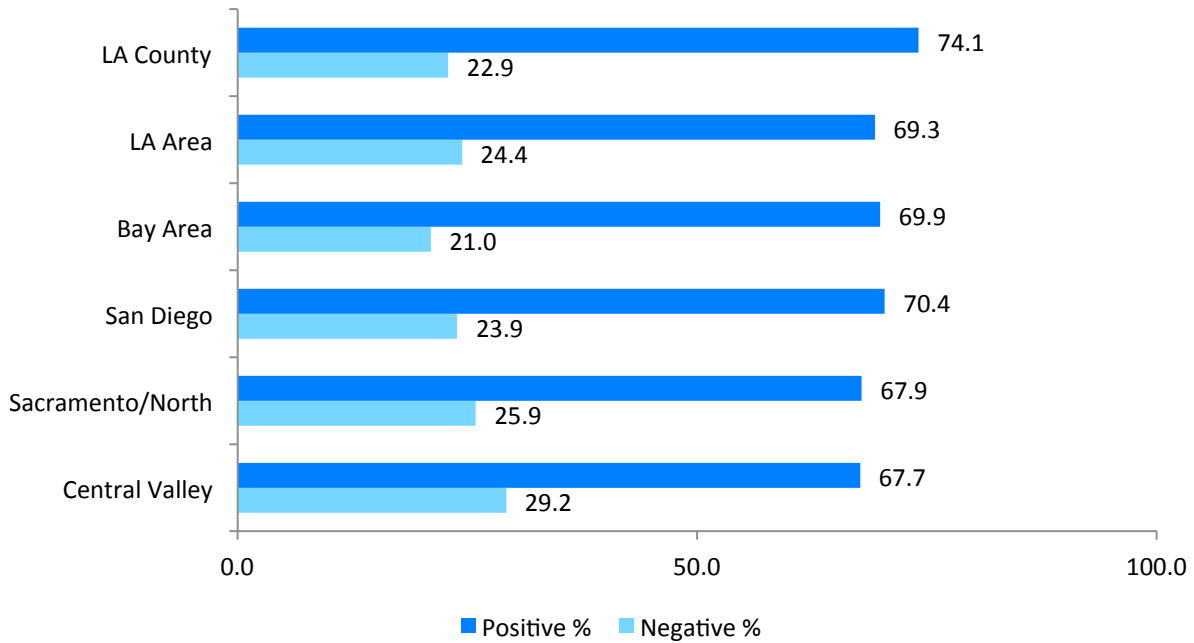


Figure 8. “72 hours in writing” by Region

Support for the reform was equally strong among men and women.

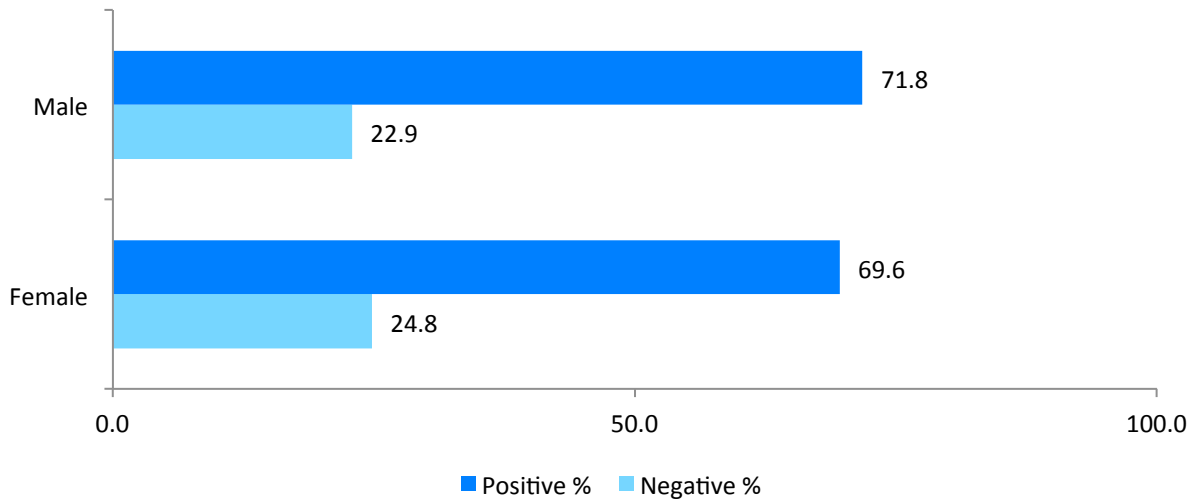


Figure 9. "72 hours in writing" by Sex

The "72 hours in writing" reform received no less than 70% support among Democrats, Republicans, and Decline-to-state's (NPP/Minor Party).

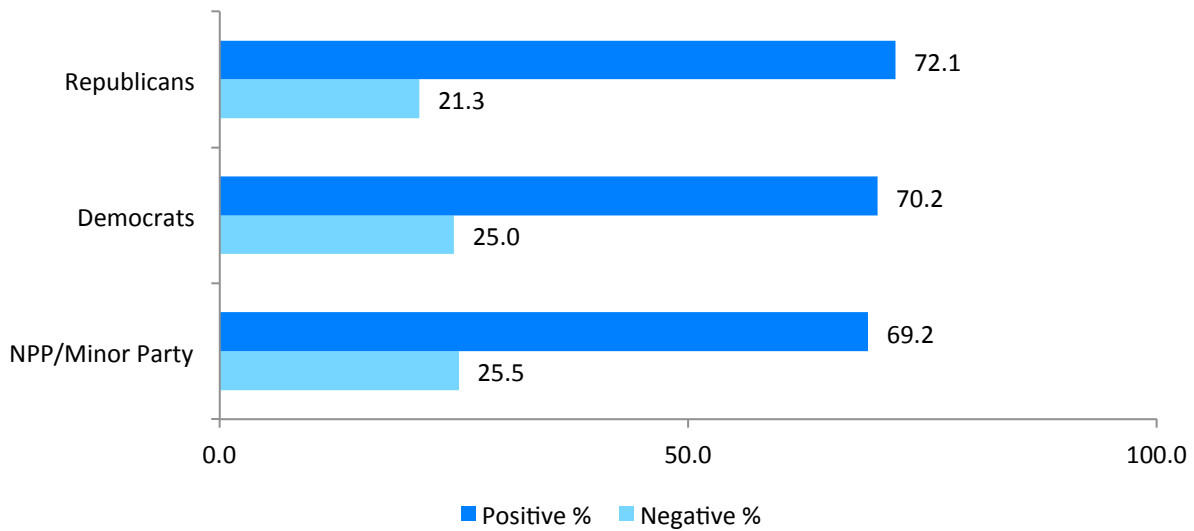


Figure 10. "72 hours in writing" by Party registration

As the following graphic demonstrates, support for all of the reforms remained relatively strong despite respondents hearing opposition arguments. There was some difference in every case, but the margins of support over opposition remained strong at between 35% and 48%, using the positive and negative index scores mentioned above.

The strongest debate margin was for searchable documents, with 64% strongly supporting prior to hearing the debate question and 72% post-debate.

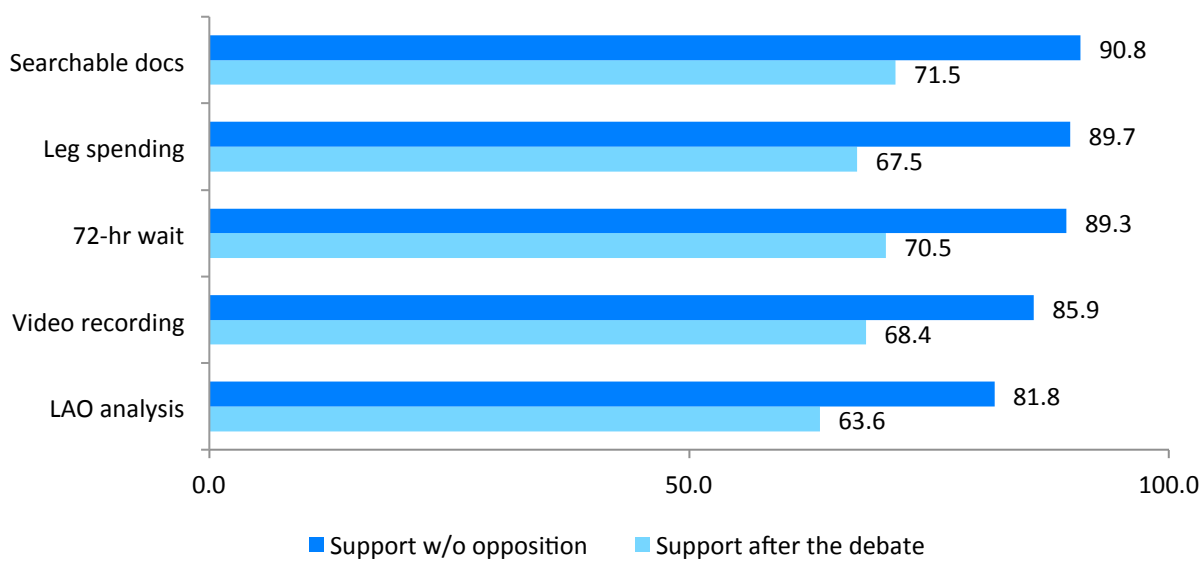


Figure 11. Reform Support Block vs. Reform Debate Block

Conclusions

The premise that Californians are hopelessly divided along ideological and partisan fault lines paints a bleak and – at least when it comes to how government should operate – incomplete picture. Californians share a number of opinions about the desire for more accountability and transparency in their state government that suggests a broad and bipartisan support for reform that can overcome existing partisan differences on other issues. The data also show that reform coalitions may reach across ideological and partisan boundaries in the knowledge that when the reforms are deemed good and necessary, they can and will attract broad public support.

About the survey

This survey of 800 likely California voters was conducted by the bi-partisan team of SmithJohnson Research and Tulchin Research from March 31 to April 2, 2015. The sampling error for this sample size is +/-3.5% at the 95% confidence level.

The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and corresponding sampling errors (at the 95% confidence level) for the demographic groups mentioned in this report.

Demographic	Unweighted Sample Size	Sampling error (+/-)
Total sample	800	3.5%
Self-ID party affiliation		
Loyal Republican	197	3.4
Switch voter	132	3.0
Loyal Democrat	363	3.8
Ideology		
Very liberal	91	2.2
Somewhat liberal	136	2.6
Moderate	258	3.2
Somewhat conservative	146	2.7
Very conservative	99	2.3
Undecided	74	2.0
Age		
18-34	163	3.0
35-44	99	2.5
45-54	122	2.7
55-64	154	3.0
65-74	110	2.6
75+	99	2.5
Ethnicity		
White	465	3.5
African American	35	1.5
Latino	161	3.0
Asian	49	1.8
Other	21	1.2

Demographic	Unweighted Sample Size	Sampling error (+/-)
Region		
LA county	201	3.0
LA area	176	2.9
Bay area	176	2.9
San Diego	72	2.0
Sacramento/North	81	2.1
Central Valley	97	2.3
Sex		
Male	377	3.5
Female	424	3.5
Party registration		
Democrat	353	3.4
Republican	240	3.2
NPP/Minor Party	209	3.0