The University of San Francisco
USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center

McCarthy Center Faculty Publications

Leo T. McCarthy Center for Public Service and the Common Good

2012

Landslide: The "Obama Surge" and the Future of California Politics

Corey Cook
University of San Francisco, cdcook2@usfca.edu

David Latterman
University of San Francisco, dclatterman@usfca.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.usfca.edu/mccarthy_fac

 Part of the Political Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Cook, Corey and Latterman, David, "Landslide: The "Obama Surge" and the Future of California Politics" (2012). *McCarthy Center Faculty Publications*. Paper 11.
http://repository.usfca.edu/mccarthy_fac/11

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Leo T. McCarthy Center for Public Service and the Common Good at USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in McCarthy Center Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

DE GRUYTER DOI 10.1515/cjpp-2012-0006 — Calif. J. Politics Policy 2012; 4(2): 113–139

Research Article

Corey Cook, David Latterman

Landslide: The "Obama Surge" and the Future of California Politics

Abstract: The 2008 presidential election in California resulted in a landslide of historic proportions. Barack Obama's victory, fueled as it was by 2.1 million first-time voters, seemingly portends a realignment in California. At the same time, outside the presidential election, the results in 2008 were well within the norms of California politics. Utilizing an original dataset, we unravel this conundrum by examining whether these "surge voters" were substantially different from habitual voters, whether they have stayed engaged in electoral politics, and what might that tell us about the future partisan and political alignment in California?

Keywords: 2008 election; 2010 election; California electorate; Obama; partisan realignment; surge voters

***Corresponding author: Corey Cook**, University of San Francisco, e-mail: cdcook2@usfca.edu
David Latterman, University of San Francisco, e-mail: dclatterman@usfca.edu

1 Landslide

The 2008 presidential election appears to be a defining moment in California's political development: Democratic registration surged, interest in the campaign and voter turnout spiked upward and presidential nominee Barack Obama won the state overwhelmingly, securing the largest percentage of the vote since 1936. The landslide rested, at least in part, upon the participation of over 2 million first-time voters. Yet despite this marked change in the composition of the electorate, the 2008 election was one of remarkable stasis: no Congressional or state legislative seats in California flipped from one political party to the other and outcomes on state-wide ballot measures were well within the historical norms.

This paper addresses a series of interrelated questions stimulated by this apparent paradox. The answers come from a rigorous analysis of the so-called "Obama surge voters" that came to the polls in unprecedented numbers to elect the Democratic nominee for president. Our examination of these first-time voters

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM

offers insight into some of the more critical questions of contemporary California politics: is the surge indicative of a new electorate and accordant partisan and ideological alignment, or is it better understood as an ephemeral phenomenon that would minimally affect other contests and subsequent elections? And what are the likely consequences of these trends in voter participation for the 2012 presidential election?

After reviewing the literature about the California electorate, the empirical portion of the paper proceeds in two parts. We first establish the breadth and depth of the Obama victory in the 2008 election that might create expectations for a Democratic realignment and analyze the other candidacies and issues on the 2008 ballot to assess the macro-effects of the surge in the electorate to query whether the surge was indeed Obama-centric. Next, we offer a systematic individual-level analysis of these surge voters to glean insight into this unique voting demographic. Our analysis extends previous research into the California electorate by moving beyond surveys of voters and instead examining measurable political behavior. In this section, we report findings from an original dataset constructed by the authors that combines precinct-level electoral results with individual data derived from the California Voter File. These data provide the sharpest view of the 2008 election and the evolving electorate in the state and help refute some of the conventional wisdom and common myths about contemporary California politics.

2 California's "Exclusive Electorate"

A substantial body of academic research, beginning with the seminal work of Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980), documents the significant differences between voters and non-voters in American politics. Gomez, Hansford and Krause conclude from their review of this literature that "it is both well established and widely accepted that individuals with higher levels of education and income, among other socioeconomic factors, participate in elections at a rate greater than their lower resourced counterparts" (Gomez et al. 2007). As for California in particular, Baldassare finds that "the people who go to the polls in California are very different from those who don't" (Baldassare 2006). Likely voters tend to be unrepresentative of the state demographically: they are older, wealthier, better educated, and more likely to be White than irregular or non-voters (Baldassare 2006). Latinos are particularly overrepresented in this latter group, a phenomenon that has muted the much-anticipated electoral impact of the growth of the Latino population (Citrin and Highton 2002). We would expect, then, that the

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM

increased participation levels in the 2008 election would produce a more diverse electorate along these various dimensions.

But aside from the demographic differences between likely voters and non-voters, it remains unclear whether these two groups evince substantially different preferences on issues or partisan affinities. In California, opinion surveys suggest that voters and non-voters "have different political attitudes and preferences" (Baldassare 2006). State-wide surveys reveal sizeable gaps about the preferred role of government, as well as on particularly policy issues including immigration, environmental issues, healthcare and fiscal issues, among a host of others (Baldassare 2006, 2008). So the large number of new voters in 2008, approximately 2.1 million strong, could produce a more politically progressive voting population in the state. More specifically, Baldassare predicts that "for ballot measures, there could be more voter support for policies that increased spending and taxes for state programs" (Baldassare 2006).

This finding differs from the expectation of scholars who generally conclude from national data that voters and non-voters do not exhibit distinct preferences on issues. For instance, a recent study surmises that, "differences in the policy liberalism of voters and nonvoters are marginal" (Ellis et al. 2006). These studies tend to reaffirm Shaffer's oft-cited conclusion that, "the policy differences between voters and nonvoters are presently neither large nor ideologically consistent... on most political issues... there are not significant policy differences between voters and non-voters" (Shaffer 1982; Bennett and Resnick 1990).

On the other hand, Baldassare's survey research is less suggestive of substantial partisan differences between likely voters and non-voters. He concludes that for candidate elections, it is difficult to say if increased turnout would benefit the Republicans or the Democrats because "so many of the newly registering voters are not in the major parties today" and new voters in California might embrace the decades-long trend towards ambivalence about the major parties (Baldassare 2006). Research at the national level affirms this ambiguity. In purely partisan terms, "there are indeed meaningful differences in the partisan leanings of voters and nonvoters. But while nonvoters usually are more Democratic than voters, there are exceptions to this tendency" (Citrin et al. 2003). Still, the conventional wisdom about the 2008 election is that historically high turnout mattered substantially in determining the partisan outcome at the presidential level (see Lupia 2010 for a dissenting view). Even if it is true that increased turnout propelled Obama to victory, it remains uncertain that this expanded electorate would systematically affect the partisan or ideological balance of the various down-ballot contests, either ballot propositions or candidate races. In short, it seems plausible that "the electoral landscape would not be transformed" by increased turnout as one particularly group of scholars

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM

concluded from their examination of previous presidential election contests (Sides et al. 2008).

Given this previous scholarship and what is known generically about the surge of voter engagement and Obama's decisive victory in the 2008 election, we consider four questions:

1. Did the dramatic increase in Democratic registration during 2008 result in substantial increases in voting for Democratic candidates in down-ballot races as might be expected by the marked increase in Democratic registration in California?
2. Were outcomes on state-wide ballot propositions substantially affected by these new voters? In particular, as the extant literature predicts, is there evidence that measures that would increase taxing and spending were more likely to pass in 2008?
3. Were these "surge voters" substantially different demographically from habitual voters and did the electorate become less "exclusive" as we would expect from the literature?
4. How did these surge voters behave after the 2008 election? Which of these surge voters participated in the 2010 gubernatorial election and what might that tell us about the future partisan and political alignment in California?

3 Data and Methods

The data herein are from an original dataset constructed for this project and available from the authors. The data include state-wide election results aggregated at the county and Assembly District levels from the state-wide Statement of the Vote, precinct-level returns from the Institute of Governmental Studies' Statewide Database and the authors' calculations based upon data drawn from the California Voter File. This last set of data are particularly useful for calculating the "Obama surge" vote. We code each individual voter as either a regular voter or a surge voter. Surge voters are those who voted in the 2008 presidential election and not previously (unless that voter also voted only in the February 2008 presidential primary).[1] In addition to voter history, the Voter File contains names, ages, and geographic markers for

1 We utilize the post-2010 voter file for this purpose because we wanted to make retrospective analyses about the behavior of surge voters in subsequent elections. As a result, a small proportion of the population is no longer registered to vote in the state and dropped from the analysis. According to the Voter File, 12.2 million people on the voter rolls in 2011 cast ballots in 2008. This number is just under 90% of the 13.7 million voters whose votes were tallied in 2008.

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM

each registrant. Using the method conceived by Enos (2010), we conduct a Bayesian probability to infer individual race based upon US Census name/race data and zip code demography.[2] Gender is inferred from the registrant's name.

For geographic comparisons, we utilize the Census designation of "urban" at the zip code level to determine urban vs. rural designation, which is the number of housing units per zip code considered to be in an urban area.[3] Lastly, our density metric is calculated at the zip code level using national data in ArcMap, where each zip code had a population per square mile value as of 2010. Over 99% of voters live in a zip code that has a density value. We use quintiles for the density categories because of the highly skewed non-normal distribution towards low-density zip codes. These data are available from the authors upon request.

4 The Obama Landslide in California

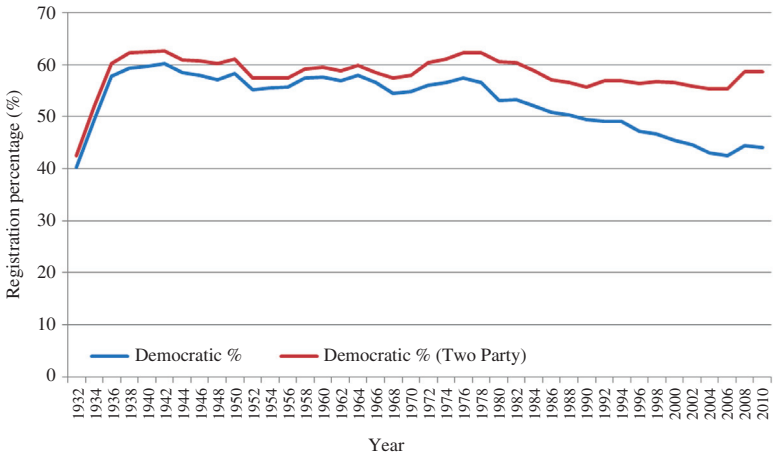
At first glance, the 2008 election cycle seems to portend a lasting change in California's political equilibrium: Californians registered and voted in higher than anticipated numbers and overwhelmingly supported the Democratic nominee Barack Obama. The election had the largest proportional turnout of eligible voters since 1972 and the partisan distribution of the electorate was skewed leftward. Between 2004 and 2008, Democrats added over 950,000 voters to their rolls while Republicans lost 8000 registrants during that period. Still, the historical data represented in Figure 1 illustrate a stark reality – the largest 1-year increase in Democratic registrants since 1972 appears as only a small uptick whether compared to all registrants or as a proportion of the two-party registration.

These changes in party affiliation were not evenly distributed across the state. Figure 2 shows increasing Democratic registration and increased turnout.

2 The Census provides a list of the 100,000 most common names in the USA, by race. These data can be used to assign a probability of a race for most given American surnames. When combined with the known ethnic breakdowns of zip codes, we assign the likely race of each surname: White, Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Native American, and multiple race. The most recent California name data are from the 2000 Census, but we were able to update the data with 2010 zip code racial percentages. This technique yielded a strong match in 85% of the names in the California voter file.

3 See http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/fedregv75n163.txt for the Census' detailed definition for urban and rural. We used 2000 Census data for the most recent urban/rural zip code percentages. A total of 98% of California registered voters were able to have an urban/rural designation based on zip code. Of this, 63% of voters were in 100% urban zip codes, and 90% were in zip codes that were defined as greater than 30% urban.

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM



Source: California Secretary of State, *Report of Registration (2008).*

Figure 1: Democratic Party Registration, 1932–2008.

Compared to 2000, a solidly Democratic year in California, increases in Democratic registration and overall voter turnout were heavily concentrated in the coastal regions of the state, thereby reinforcing the state's emerging geo-political divide (Cain et al. 2008; Douzet and Miller 2008; Kousser 2009; Cook and Latterman 2011). Turnout also increased substantially in the Central Valley and the Inland Empire regions. And ultimately, Obama's staggering 61.1% of the vote was the highest proportion received by a presidential candidate in 72 years. His victory was both deep and broad. He won counties in all corners of the state including traditionally conservative counties in the Central Valley (Fresno and Merced) and won both Inland Empire counties (Riverside and San Bernardino), while narrowly losing Republican strongholds Orange County and San Diego County.

Candidate Obama racked up this 24-point victory despite having lost the state's primary election to Hilary Clinton (51.5% to 43.2%) and despite facing off against the Republicans' best chance to carry the state – a moderate candidate with a track record of having performed well in California (Marelius 2008) with demonstrated appeal to moderates and independent voters historically. The state's "traditional purple hue" has been cemented by moderate Republicans like Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger (Fiorina and Abrams 2008) and a similarly situated candidate like McCain seemed primed to represent a viable candidacy in California. That Obama carried California was not a surprise, but that he did so by a margin nearly double that of candidates Bill Clinton, Al Gore and John Kerry was a stunning outcome. And at least in the popular discourse and state-wide

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM

Source: California Secretary of State, *Report of Registration (2008)*.

Figure 2: Democratic Party Registration and Overall Voter Turnout Changes by County, 2000–2008.

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM

media, much of the credit for Obama's victory has been attributed to the "surge" of first-time voters who comprised approximately one-sixth of the electorate.

5 An Obama Surge or a Democratic Surge?

The first empirical question is whether this surge is better understood as a partisan or person-specific phenomenon. At least in aggregate, as the extant literature predicts given the unaffiliated nature of irregular voters, the surge appears not to have trickled down the ballot to other partisan contests. No Congressional or state legislative seats, of the 153 contested, changed party hands and Table 1 shows that in aggregate votes, Democrats only gained slightly in the State Senate and State Assembly.[4] So while Democrats did perform three to four points better in down-ballot races in 2008 than in 2004, this number is not particularly impressive given the magnitude of the Obama victory and the spike in Democratic registration and turnout.

More significantly, there appears to be little correlation between the degree of surge (aggregated by the smallest easily-analyzed electoral unit, state Assembly district) and the proportion of the vote garnered by Democratic candidates in those districts.[5] Figure 3 shows the change in the proportion of the vote received by the Democratic candidate in contested Assembly races and the magnitude of the surge in that district. While definitive causal conclusions are not possible, the data are suggestive that the surge was directed toward Obama rather than Democrats generically.

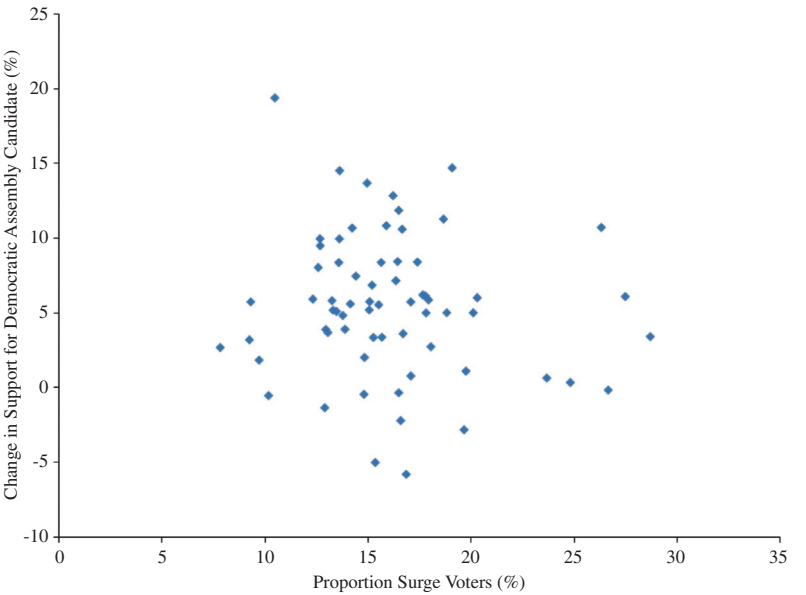
	2004	2008	Difference
Presidential Election	54.4%	61.1%	6.7%
State Senate Elections	53.7%	55.1%	1.4%
State Assembly Elections	53.7%	57.8%	4.1%

Table 1: Proportion of the Aggregate Vote Garnered by Democratic Candidates.
Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote (2004 and 2008 General Election)*.

4 Democratic Congressional candidates received 59.9% of the vote as compared with 53.5% of the vote in the previous election, but most of this difference is the result of seven Democrats running unopposed (compared with only two Republicans running unopposed) in 2008.

5 Note that these are aggregate rather than individual data and are therefore subject to the ecologic inference fallacy. As such, it is not possible to draw reliable inferences about individual voting behavior based solely upon these results and they ought to be interpreted with caution.

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM



Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote* and authors' calculations.

Figure 3: Surge Proportion and Net Change in Democratic Vote, Assembly Elections 2004–2008 (r^2=0.26).

6 An Obama Surge or a Liberal/Progressive Surge?

The second empirical question is whether the surge might represent an ideological shift in the electorate. The literature demonstrating substantial differences in the policy preferences of likely and non-voters might lead us to expect to find meaningful differences in the outcomes of state-wide ballot measures than might otherwise have occurred. Yet evidence of an impact of the surge voters on issues on the ballot is not strongly apparent. Three ballot propositions on the 2008 election were substantively nearly identical to measures placed on previous state-wide ballots. The central features of these measures are described in Table 2.[6]

6 None of these measures is exactly the same as before – the magnitude and relative cost of the bond measures differ and Proposition 4, the 2008 measure to restrict abortions, included a specific provision to allow notification of an adult family member rather than a parent to mollify some critics of the previous version.

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM

Though these elections occur in different political and fiscal contexts, the salience of these issues changes over time, and the electorates vary widely from 1 year to the next, the state-wide results appear quite stable over time. The consistency in the outcomes is striking regardless of the year, type of election, or turnout level. This is unexpected given the literature on likely and non-voters cited above, and particularly striking and puzzling for the abortion measure. Pre-election polling demonstrated a substantial link between partisan affiliation and

	Proposition 4	**Proposition 85**	**Proposition 73**
Parental Notification of Abortion			
Election	2008 General	2006 General	2005 Special
Total Votes	12,948,941	8,444,842	7,786,022
Results	48.0%	45.8%	47.2%
Major Provisions	Requires waiting period and adult relative notification with exception for medical waiver by court	Requires waiting period and parental notification with exception for medical waiver by court	Requires waiting period and parental notification with exception for medical waiver by court
	Proposition 3	**Proposition 61**	
Children's Hospital Bonds			
Election	2008 General	2004 General	
Total Votes	12,638,905	11,379,404	
Results	55.3%	58.3%	
Major Provisions	$980 million in general obligation bonds	$750 million general obligation bonds, 20% for urgent acute care and 80% for general acute care hospitals	
	Proposition 12	**Proposition 32**	**Proposition 16**
Veterans' Housing Bonds			
Election	2008 General	2000 General	2000 Primary
Total Votes	12,288,826	10,038,296	7,068,129
Results	63.5%	67.2%	62.3%
Major Provisions	$900 million in general obligation bonds to assist veterans purchase farms, homes, and mobile homes	$50 million in general obligation bonds for new and existing veterans' homes	$500 million in general obligation bonds for farm and home aid for veterans

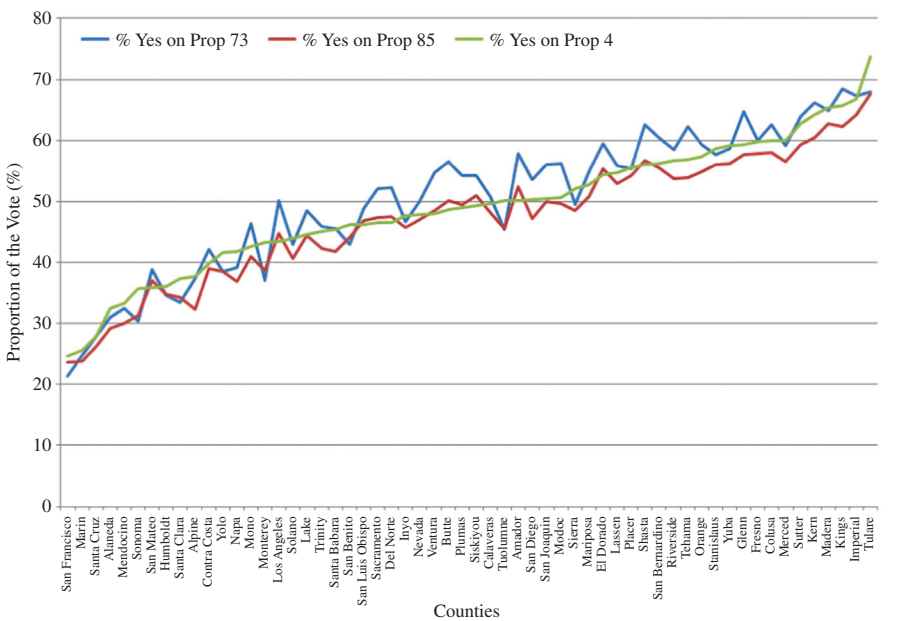
Table 2: 2008 General Election "Re-Run" Ballot Measures.
Source: California Secretary of State: http://www.ss.ca.gov.

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM

preferences for Proposition 4. Republicans favored the measure by a margin of 62 to 28%, but Democrats only approved of it by 35–56% (Baldassare et al. 2008). And regulation of abortion remains one of the key components of the divide between the parties. Historically, there is a 24-point difference between partisans in levels of support for passing laws that restrict abortion. The magnitude of this divide has increased in recent years (Public Policy Institute of California 2008).

Despite heightened Democratic registration and a presidential landslide, the overall returns on Proposition 4 appear highly consistent with the previous parental notification measures. Results on these three propositions by county are displayed in Figure 4 and by Assembly District in Figure 5. Both charts demonstrate the remarkable consistency in the balloting across three distinctive elections (presidential, midterm and special) and wide variations in the size of the electorate.

As shown in Figure 6, the magnitude of the surge appears largely unrelated to the vote on Proposition 4 ($r^2 = 0.03$). The magnitude of the surge, aggregated at the Assembly District level, appears largely unrelated to the vote on Proposition 4. Again, it seems that there is no apparent correlation between the surge vote and changes in relative support for abortion restrictions.



Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote.*

Figure 4: Support for Parental Notification by County: Proposition 4 (2008), Proposition 73 (2005) and Proposition 85 (2006).

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM

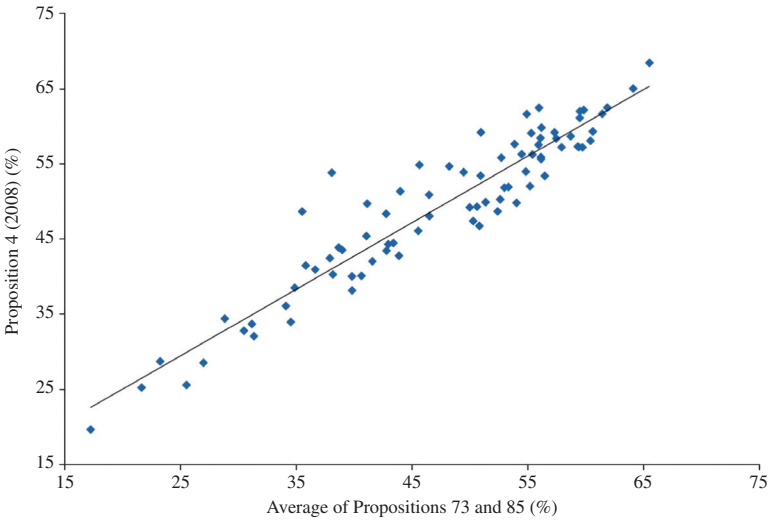


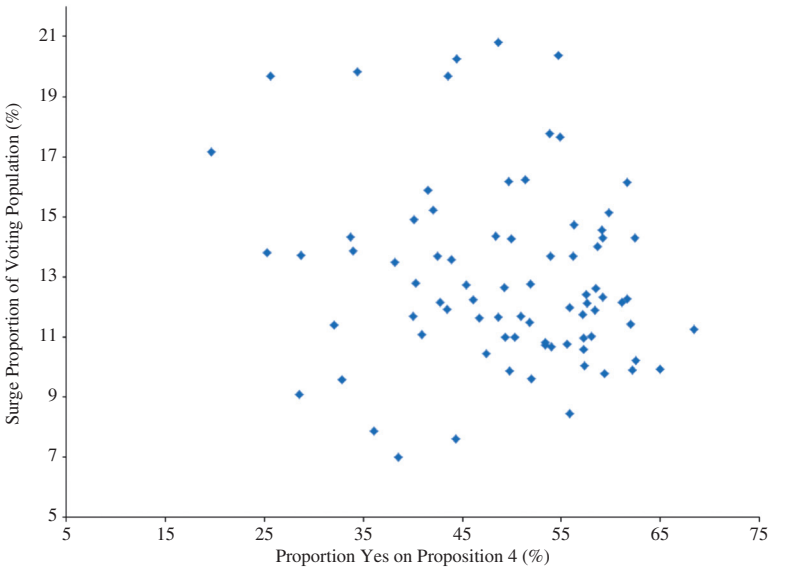
Figure 5: Support for Proposition 4 and Average of Propositions 73 and 85 by California Assembly District (r^2=0.96).

A similar phenomenon is apparent in the state-wide results for the Children's Hospital bonds and Veterans' Housing bonds. The literature establishes a distinction between the preferences of regular and non-voters in regards to governmental spending as articulated in surveys. Accordingly, we would expect to find that the higher turnout in 2008 would produce, in aggregate, substantially greater support for these bond measures. However, the level of consistency with the comparable ballot propositions from previous elections is striking. Figure 7 shows the high correlation between Proposition 3 in 2008 and Proposition 61 in 2004 by Assembly District. Because of the legislative redistricting that occurred after the 2000 Census, a similar analysis of Proposition 12 is not possible.[7]

Unlike the abortion measure, however, there is a mildly positive correlation between the surge and support for the two bond proposals, as shown in Figure 8 and Figure 9: Assembly Districts with the highest proportion of surge voters are indeed among the most supportive of the two bonds. Again, the ecological

7 California voters have approved all 27 veteran's bonds appearing on state-wide ballots historically, and results have typically fallen in a similar range of support.

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM



Source: Institute of Governmental Studies Statewide Database and authors' calculations.

Figure 6: Support for Proposition 4 (Parental Notification) and "Surge" Proportion of the Vote by California Assembly District (r^2=0.03).

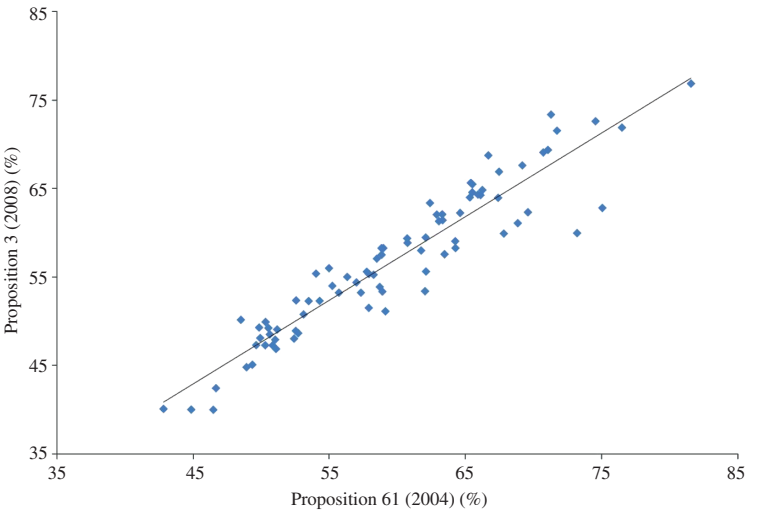
inference fallacy precludes definitive conclusions. However, it seems plausible that surge voters might have been somewhat more supportive of these bonds than regular voters, affirming our expectations. Taken together, however, it appears that the electorate only became more ideologically liberal on governmental borrowing and not on social issues. This distinction merits further consideration in subsequent research.

Despite our expectations about the likely consequences of introducing 2.1 million new voters into the electorate (16% of those who voted), it seems that the surge was less than momentous for down ballot races and ballot propositions. This suggests that this spike in turnout ought to be interpreted as particular to the presidential election – a distinctly "Obama surge."

7 Who Were the Surge Voters?

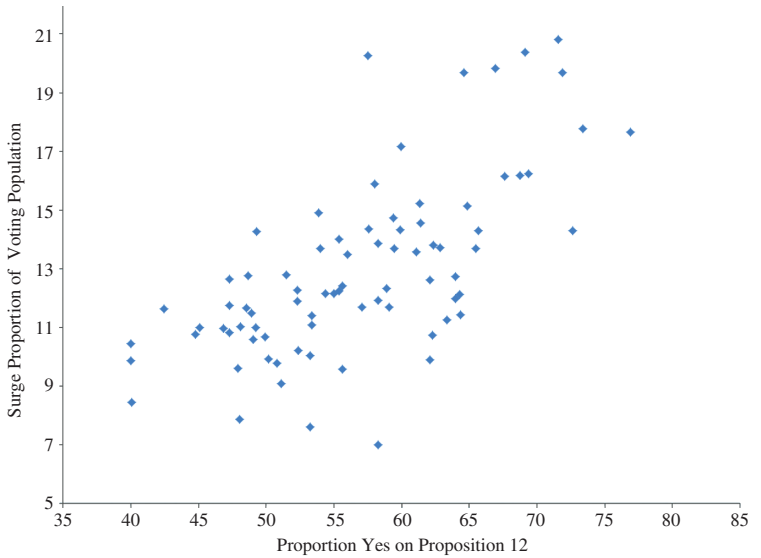
Aside from producing the largest presidential landslide in 70 years, these new voters did not substantially impact the political equilibrium in California politics. A larger, more diverse, less partisan and unpredictable electorate delivered an

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM



Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote (2004 and 2008 General Election).*

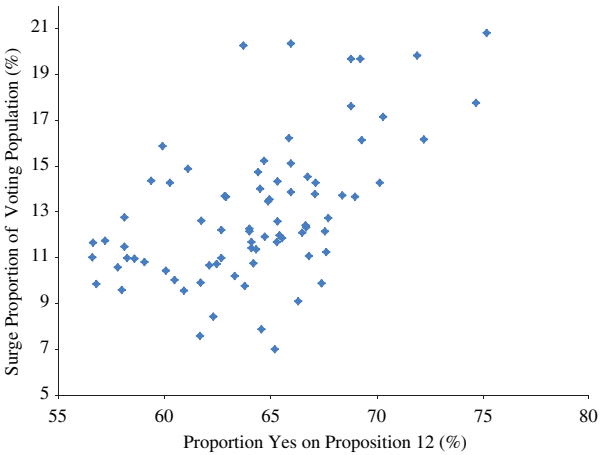
Figure 7: Support for Children's Hospital Bonds: Proposition 3 (2008) and Proposition 61 (2004) by California Assembly District (r^2=0.88).



Source: Institute of Governmental Studies Statewide Database and authors' calculations.

Figure 8: Support for Proposition 3 (Children's Hospital Bonds) and "Surge" Proportion of the Vote by California Assembly District (r^2=0.44).

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM



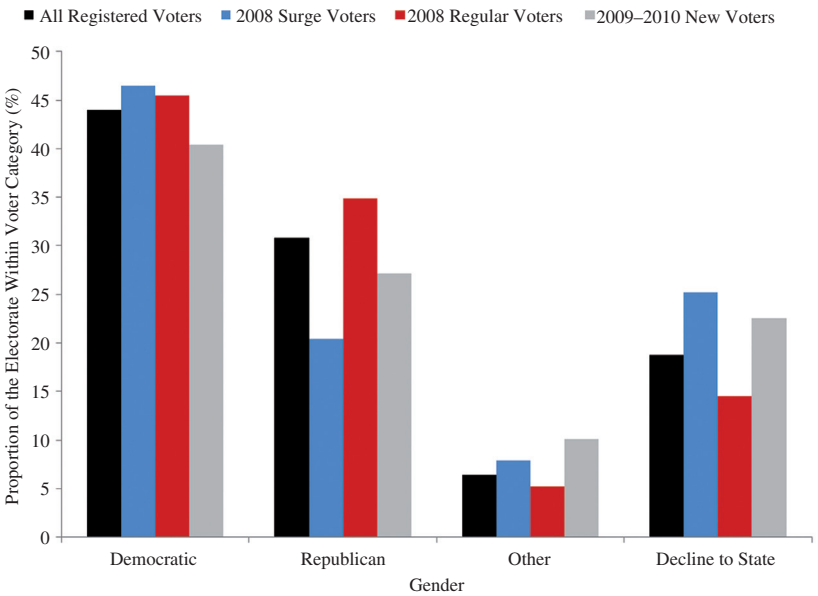
Source: Institute of Governmental Studies Statewide Database and authors' calculations.

Figure 9: Support for Proposition 12 (Veterans' Housing Bonds) and "Surge" Proportion of the Vote by California Assembly District (r^2=0.27).

utterly predictable set of outcomes in the 2008 election in the state. Much attention, both in the scholarly literature and popular press, has been accorded to assessing the role of new voters in the Obama victory (Beinart 2008; Ceaser and DiSalvo 2008; Von Drehle 2008; Dreier 2009; Lupia 2010) and on the same-sex marriage measures on the ballot in California and Florida (Egan and Sherrill 2009; Cook and Latterman 2010; Slade and Smith 2011). Still, remarkably little is known about these voters, and inferences about them are primarily derived from exit poll data. This section attempts to systematically identify these enigmatic voters who brought about both change and continuity to determine whether these "Obama surge voters" were substantially different demographically from habitual voters as we would expect from the literature and whether they are becoming permanently integrated into the electorate.

On this point, the data are clear. Our analysis of the voter file shows that Obama surge voters in California were different from other voters. The electorate in 2008 was younger, more urban, more ethnically and racially diverse, and less likely to be affiliated with either of the two major political parties as a result of these new voters. But the Obama surge was not as demographically distinct as we might have anticipated. Figures 10–16 compare 2008 surge voters with all registered voters in California and two other subsets of registered voters, those "non-surge" voters who voted in 2008, and those who have were first-time voters after the 2008 election. Data are presented by party, age, gender, geography, and

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM



Source: California Voter File and authors' calculations.

Figure 10: Partisan Distributions Within Categories of Voters in California.

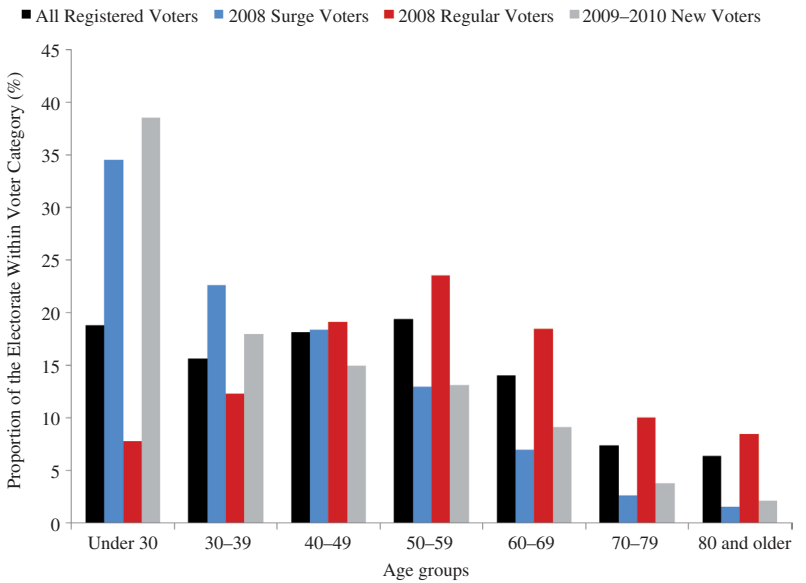
ethnicity.[8] This category of new voters, approximately 900,000 strong, offers a particularly useful comparison between a "normal" increase in voters and one fueled by an historical presidential campaign.

These profiles suggest that surge voters lay somewhere between likely voters and non-voters in Baldassare's analysis. Surge voters in 2008 were slightly more likely to be Democratic than regular voters (46.5–45.5%), but not significantly so. Rather, surge voters were substantially more likely to be unaffiliated with a political party (25.2% of surge voters were unaffiliated compared with 14.5% of experienced voters), something also true of new registrants generally. It turns out that Republicans in California did not do a bad job of turning out their regular voters in 2008 – Republicans trailed Democrats by 45.5%–34.9% compared with a 13-point gap on registration. But only one in five surge voters were registered Republicans.

Not surprisingly, as Figure 11 depicts, surge voters in 2008, were skewed dramatically younger than the general electorate. Just under 35% of the Obama surge

8 Data for the fourth subgroup, non-newly registered voters who did not vote in 2008, are available from the authors.

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM



Source: California Voter File and authors' calculations.

Figure 11: Age Distributions Within Categories of Voters in California.

were voters under the age 30 years. Of regular voters, only 7.8% fell into this age bracket. Interestingly, a higher percentage of new voters in 2010 were under 30 years old than in 2008. So while Obama did inspire younger voters to turn out, new voters in the 2008 election were more likely to be between 30 and 50 years old than new voters in 2010.

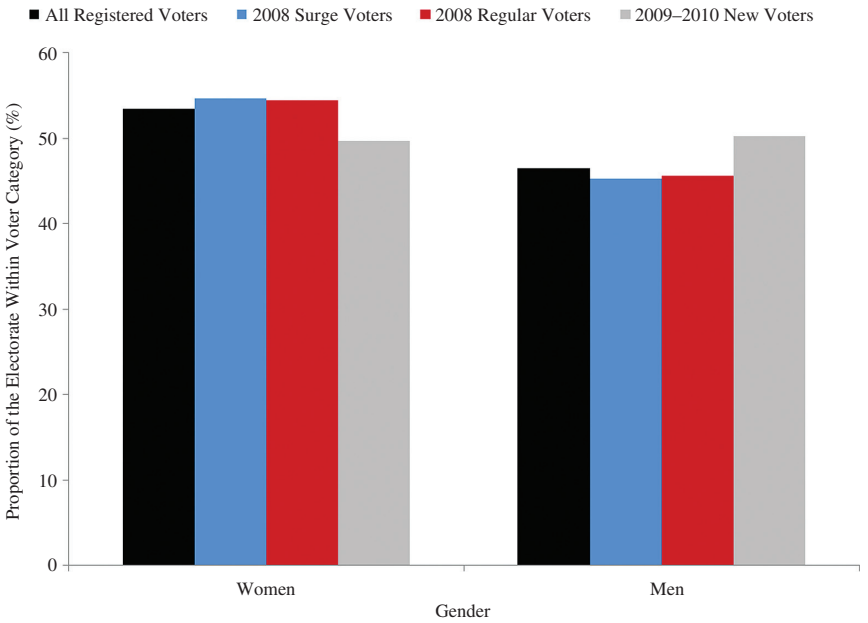
Figure 12 shows very little differences within these categories of voters by gender. Women were more likely to turn out to vote in 2008 than men, and were more likely to be surge voters. But the proportion of women in the pool of registered voters is similar. Interestingly, the 2010 election counteracted this trend somewhat – just over half of new voters in 2010 were men.

The 2008 surge was also a geographic phenomenon – more than half of these new voters were registered in Los Angeles or Bay Area counties as shown in Figure 13.

Accordingly, the surge was disproportionately urban in nature, as shown in Figure 14.

Figure 15 provides a finer assessment of the significance of population density in describing the surge. As aggregated at the zip code level, the largest source of the surge was in the most densely populated areas in California.

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM

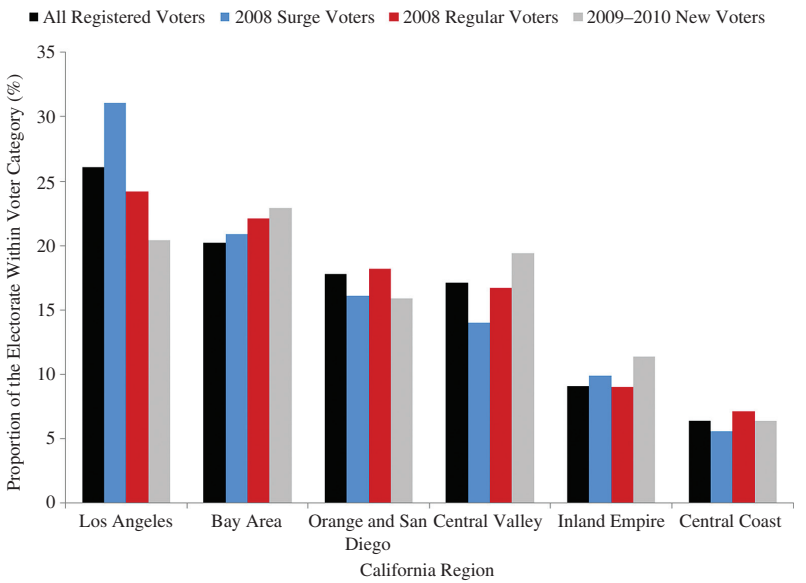


Source: California Voter File and authors' calculations.

Figure 12: Gender Distributions Within Categories of Voters in California.

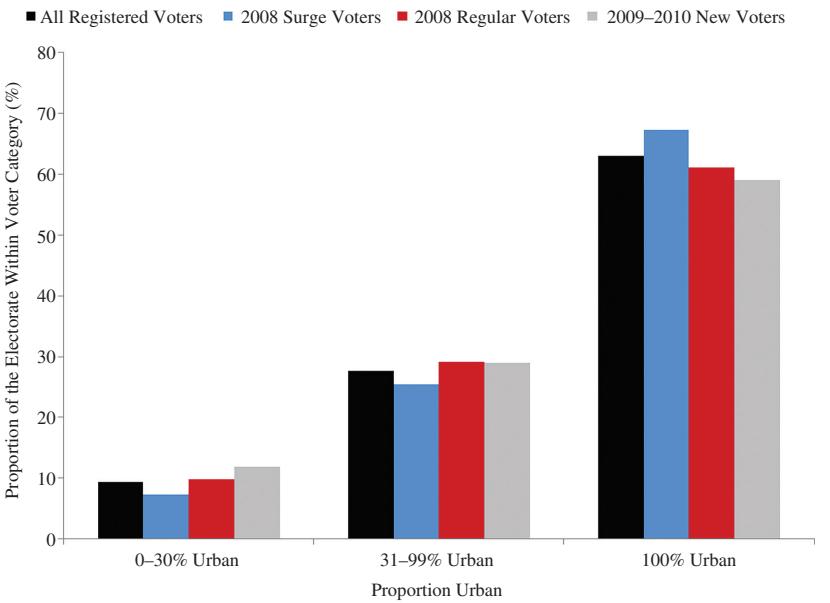
Lastly, a narrow majority of surge voters were people of color; Latino, Asian and Pacific Islander, and African Americans were disproportionately more likely to be first-time voters in 2008. A couple of things are particularly striking about Figure 16. First is the comparison between 2008 surge voters and new voters in 2010 (which were 62% White). The second is the relatively low number of African Americans among surge voters. Much of the popular fiction about the passage of the same-sex marriage ban in 2008 focused on the role of African American voters in California who were supposedly drawn to the polls to vote for Obama and ensured defeat of Proposition 8. While exit polls suggest that African Americans favored Proposition 8, it is essentially impossible for first-time African American voters to have substantially affected the outcome given the scarcity of African Americans (7.5%) amongst the 2.1 million surge voters (Cook and Latterman 2010; Egan and Sherill 2009). In fact, these data show the central importance of Latino voters in the 2008 election. Exit polls actually depicted a decrease in Latino turnout in California between 2004 and 2008 (from 21% down to 18%) (Lopez 2008). But it turns out that just under 20% of regular voters were Latino, and nearly 30% of surge

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM



Source: California Voter File and authors' calculations.

Figure 13: Regional Distributions of Voters in California.



Source: California Voter File and authors' calculations.

Figure 14: Urban Distributions Within Categories of Voters in California by City.

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM

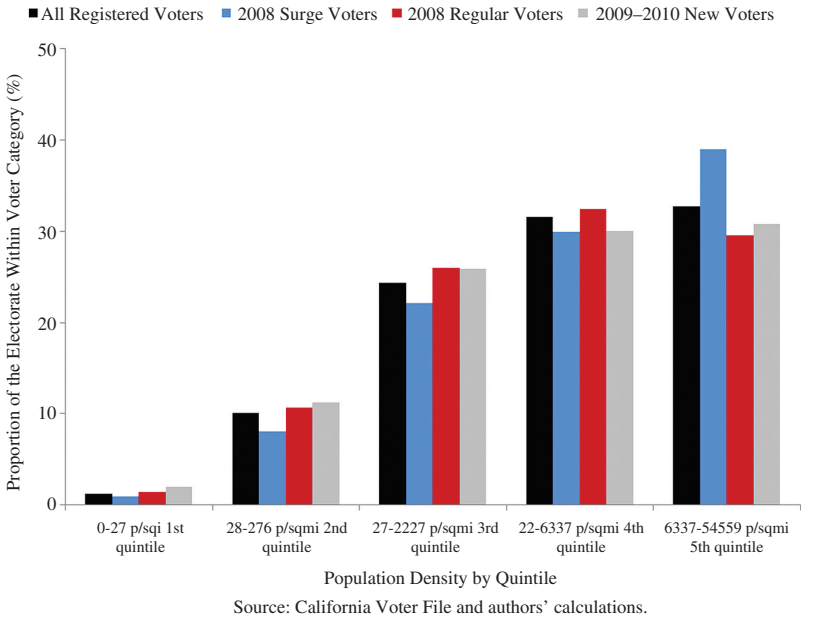


Figure 15: Population Distributions Within Categories of Voters in California by Zip Code.

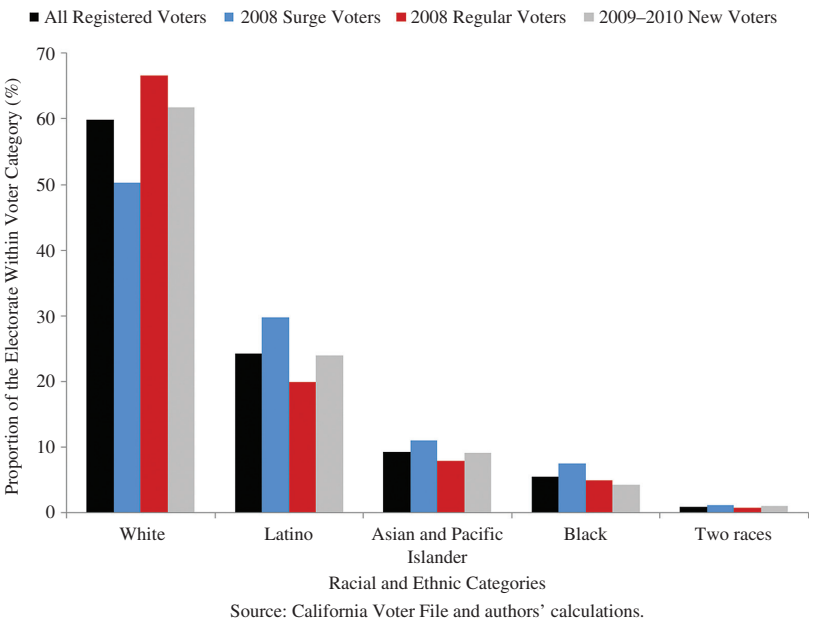


Figure 16: Racial and Ethnic Distributions Within Categories of Voters in California.

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM

voters were Latino.[9] The same exit polls show Obama receiving 74% of the Latino vote, compared to 63% garnered by Senator John Kerry in 2004. The significance of this Latino vote is discussed further below.

8 The Surge Revisited

While polling of the 2008 election show definitively that new voters were more likely to support Obama in the presidential election, we argue that they have minimal impact on other electoral outcomes. One reason for this is provided in Table 3: roll-off between the presidential election and other contests increased substantially between 2004 and 2008; it seems likely that a good percentage of these surge voters likely chose not to participate in down-ballot elections.

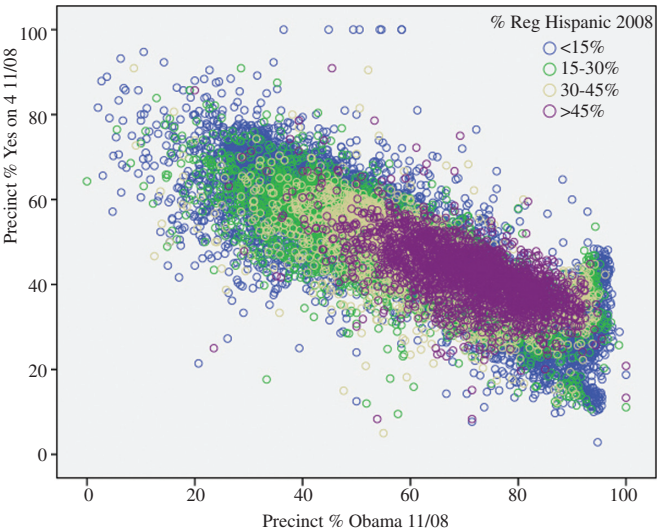
But the unique demography of the Obama surge vote, particularly in terms of age, ethnicity and partisanship, simultaneously produced a landslide and stasis on other contests. In Figures 17, 18 and 19, we incorporate Census to demonstrate the complexity of the voting patterns on the ballot propositions discussed above. Precincts are color-coded to indicate the proportion of Latinos. While the bulk of predominantly Latino precincts tends toward the upper range of the support for Obama (centered around the 75% range) they appear more conservative than we might expect on each of the ballot measures (more in favor of the restrictions on abortion rights and less in favor of the two bond measures). This accounts for some of the apparent contradiction: surge voters were simply less partisan and liberal than we might expect given their heightened support Obama.[10] This result is fully consistent with Highton and Wolfinger's contention that "the 'party of non-voters' is heterogeneous" (Highton and Wolfinger 2001).

	2004	2008
House Elections	6.3%	9.0%
State Senate Elections	8.7%	9.1%
State Assembly Elections	8.1%	11.8%

Table 3: Proportion of the Undervotes Relative to the Presidential Election.
Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote (2004 and 2008 General Election)*.

9 The Public Policy Institute of California's statewide surveys estimate that only 18% of likely voters in the 2010 election are Latino (Public Policy Institute of California 2010).
10 Note that the oddly shaped tail of these distributions is largely centered in Los Angeles County.

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM



Source: Cook and Latterman 2010, Institute of Governmental Studies Statewide Database.

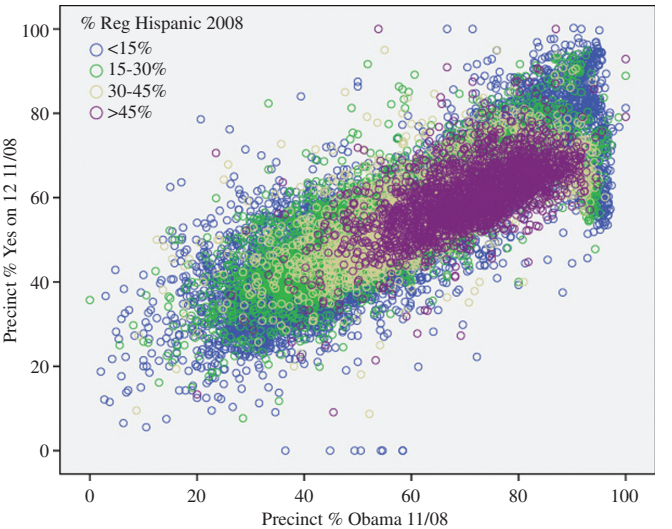
Figure 17: Proposition 4 (Parental Notification) and Obama by Precinct and Proportion Latino.



Source: Cook and Latterman 2010, Institute of Governmental Studies Statewide Database.

Figure 18: Proposition 3 (Children's Hospital Bonds) and Obama by Precinct and Proportion Latino.

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM



Source: Cook and Latterman 2010, Institute of Governmental Studies Statewide Database.

Figure 19: Proposition 12 (Veterans' Housing Bonds) and Obama by Precinct and Proportion Latino.

9 Whither the Surge?

Despite reinforcing, rather than fundamentally restructuring, the ideological and partisan alignment of the California electorate, the Obama surge remains a potent political phenomenon. The 2.1 million new voters in the 2008 election dwarfs the number of new voters in 2010 and is quite distinctive in terms of geography, partisanship and ethnicity. If the 2008 surge population were to stay engaged politically, the exclusive electorate would become less so. A series of studies have argued that the Latino vote has been relatively insignificant in California; "the three percentage point or so gain provided by Latino voters (to Democratic gubernatorial candidates) clearly is only part of the story, a relatively small part" (Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Highton and Citrin 2002). Our data suggest that surge voters were disproportionately likely to be Latino, and also African American and Asian and Pacific Islander. In this final empirical section, we examine the post-Obama electoral behavior of Obama surge voters to predict whether these voters might become more regular participants in the electoral process.

In short, the evidence for sustained engagement is not encouraging. Generally speaking, only 42% of the surge voters participated in the 2010 gubernatorial

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM

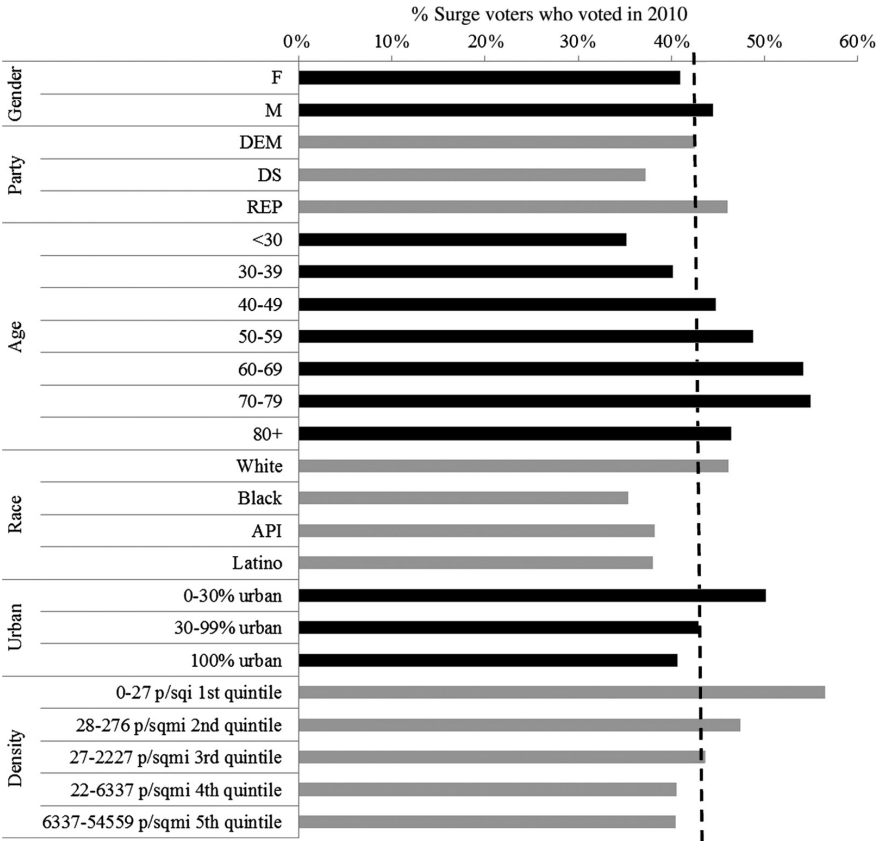


Figure 20: Proportion of Surge Voters Participating in 2010 Gubernatorial Election by Demographic Groupings.

election as marked by the reference line in Figure 20. Those who returned to the polls skewed older, more partisan, more Republican, more White, and more rural. Indeed, if the Republicans are to take anything from the historical victories scored by the Democrats in the 2010 election, the first time since 1883 the Democrats won all state-wide offices and both chambers of the state legislature, it is that their new voters were more likely to stay engaged in electoral politics.

Figure 21 depicts the participation rates of surge voters in the 2010 election by zip code. Note that the regions within which the surge was most pronounced (Los Angeles and Bay Area) experiences the steepest declines in participation. Rather, continued engagement was far more likely in less urban and less dense zip codes and in the inland portion of California.

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM

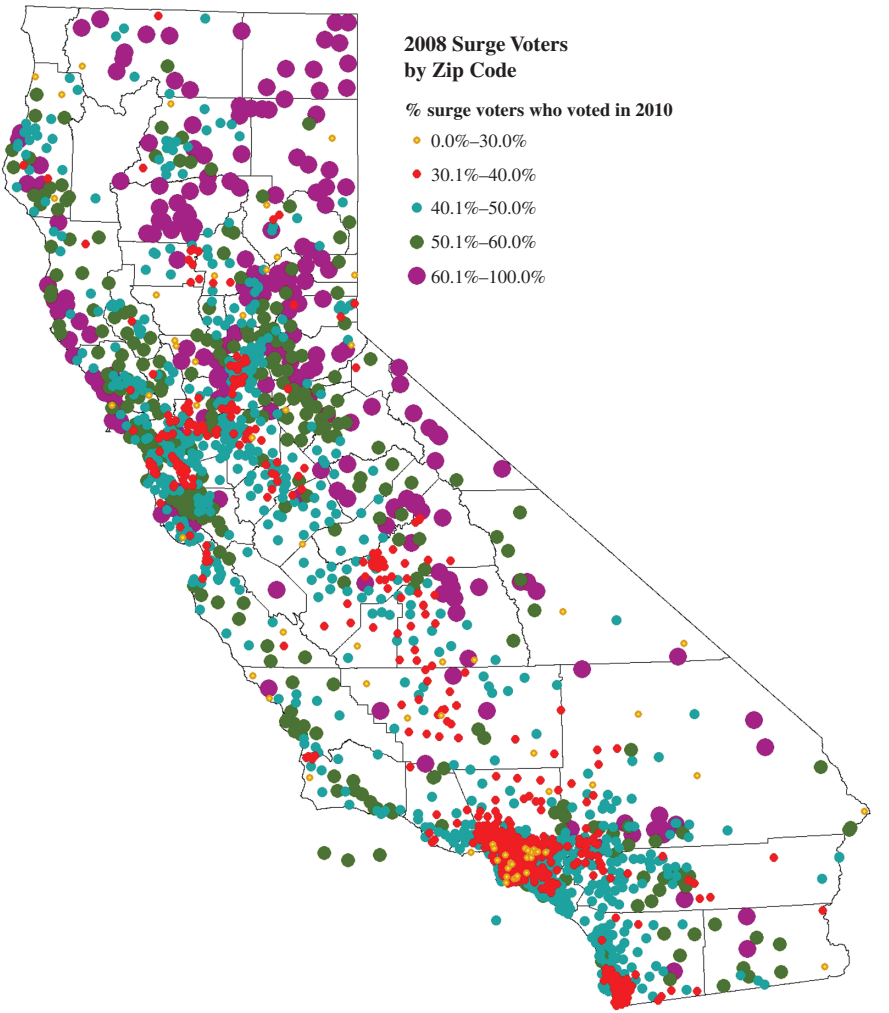


Figure 21: Proportion of Surge Voters Participating in 2010 Gubernatorial Election By Zip Code.

In sum, our research is highly suggestive that the Obama surge, though historic in many respects, was ephemeral and largely restricted to the presidential election. Whether legions of new voters turn out for the 2012 contest or former surge voters re-enter the electorate is indeterminate at this stage, but it seems highly unlikely to expect a similar flood given their rapid disengagement in 2010. Though these predictions about the future are tentative, one clear benefit of the data reported herein is that they permit conjectures on the basis of behavioral,

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM

rather than merely attitudinal, data and accordingly provide some guideposts concerning future behaviors.

Acknowledgment: Corey Cook, PhD is Director of the Leo T. McCarthy Center and David Latterman, MS, MPP is Associate Director of the Leo T. McCarthy Center at the University of San Francisco. The authors wish to thank the McCarthy Center and College of Arts and Sciences for their support of this project.

References

Baldassare, Mark (2006) *California's Exclusive Electorate*. Public Policy Institute of California. September 2006, pp. 1–18.

Baldassare, Mark (2008) *California's Post-Partisan Future*. Public Policy Institute of California. January 2008, pp. 1–23.

Baldassare, Mark, Dean Bonner, Jennifer Paluch and Sonja Petek (2008) *Statewide Survey: Californians and their Government*. Public Policy Institute of California. September 2008, pp. 1–33.

Beinart, Peter (2008) "The New Liberal Order: The Obama Presidency is Just the Beginning," Time, 24–26.

Bennett, Stephen Earl and David Resnick (1990) "The Implications of Nonvoting for Democracy in the United States," American Journal of Political Science, 34(3):771–802.

Cain, Bruce, Iris Hui and Karin MacDonald (2008) "Sorting or Self-Sorting: Competition and Redistricting in California." In: (Douzet, Kousser, Miller, eds.) *The New Political Geography of California*. Berkeley: Berkeley Public Policy Press.

Ceaser, James W. and DiSalvo, Daniel (2008) "The Magnitude of the 2008 Democratic Victory: By the Numbers," The Forum, 6(4):Article 8.

Citrin, Jack and Benjamin Highton (2002) *How Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration Shape the California Electorate*. Public Policy Institute of California. December 2002, pp. 1–99.

Citrin, Jack, Eric Schickler and John Sides (2003) "What if Everyone Voted? Simulating the Impact of Increased Turnout in Senate Elections," American Journal of Political Science, 47(1):75–90.

Cook, Corey and David Latterman. (2010) *Preaching to the Choir: The Battle over Proposition 8 in California*. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, San Francisco, Unpublished Paper. April 2010.

Cook, Corey and Latterman, David (2011) "San Benito County and California's Geopolitical Fault Lines," California Journal of Politics and Policy, 3(1):Article 3.

Douzet, Frederick and Kenneth P. Miller (2008) "California's East-West Divide." In: (Douzet, Kousser, Miller, eds.) *The New Political Geography of California*. Berkeley: Berkeley Public Policy Press.

Dreier, Peter. 2009 "Organizing in the Obama Era: A Progressive Moment or a New Progressive Era?" The John Marshall Law Review, 42:685, Spring.

Egan, Patrick J. and Kenneth Sherrill (2009) *California's Proposition 8: What Happened, and What Does the Future Hold?* San Francisco: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute, pp. 1–16.

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM

Ellis, Christopher R., Joseph Daniel Ura and Jenna Ashley-Robinson (2006) "The Dynamic Consequences of Nonvoting in American National Elections," Political Research Quarterly, 59(2):227–233.

Enos, Ryan D. (2010) "*The Persistence of Racial Threat: Evidence from the 2008 Election*." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association. Washington, DC, pp. 1–72.

Fiorina, Morris P. and Samiel J. Abrams (2008) "Is California Really a Blue State?" In: (Douzet, Kousser, Miller, eds.) *The New Political Geography of California*. Berkeley: Berkeley Public Policy Press, pp. 296–308.

Gomez, Brad T., Thomas G. Hansford and George A. Krause (2007) "The Republicans Should Pray for Rain: Weather, Turnout, and Voting in U.S. Presidential," The Journal of Politics, 69(3):649–663.

Highton, Benjamin and Raymond E. Wolfinger (2001) "The Political Implications of Higher Turnout," British Journal of Political Science, 31(1):179–192.

Kousser, Thad (2009) "How Geopolitics Cleaved California's Republicans and United Its Democrats," The California Journal of Politics and Policy, 1(1):1–24.

Lopez, Mark Hugo (2008) *The Hispanic Vote in the 2008 Election*. *Pew Hispanic Center*. Retrieved from http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/98.pdf.

Lupia, Arthur (2010) Did Bush Voters Cause Obama's Victory? PS: Political Science and Politics, 43:239–241.

Marelius, John (2008) State GOP Confident McCain Can Win: California Campaign Could be Too Pricey. San Diego Union Tribune. February 25, 2008.

Public Policy Institute of California (2008) *Just the Facts: California's Partisan Divide*. August 2008. Retrieved from http://www.ppic.org.

Public Policy Institute of California (2010) *Just the Facts: Latino Likely Voters in California*. September 2010. Retrieved from http://www.ppic.org.

Shaffer, Stephen D. (1982) "Policy Differences Between Voters and Non-Voters in American Elections," The Western Political Quarterly, 35(4):496–510.

Sides, John, Eric Schickler and Jack Citrin (2008) "If Everyone Had Voted, Would Bubba and Dubya Have Won?'' Presidential Studies Quarterly, 38(3):521–539.

Slade, Stephanie and Smith, Daniel A. (2011) "Obama to Blame? African American Surge Voters and the Ban on Same-Sex Marriage in Florida," The Forum, 9(2):Article 6.

Von Drehle, David (2008) "The Year of the Youth Vote,'' Time, Thursday, Jan. 31, 2008. Retrieved from http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1708836,00.html.

Wolfinger, Raymond E. and Steven J. Rosenstone (1980) *Who Votes?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Brought to you by | University of San Francisco
Authenticated
Download Date | 10/16/14 9:15 PM