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# San Benito County and California's Geopolitical Fault Lines

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## San Benito County and California's Geopolitical Fault Lines

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### Abstract

Over the past decade San Benito County has emerged as California's textbook bellwether county, narrowly mirroring statewide election results on ballot measures and statewide candidate races. San Benito's uncanny predictive power suggests the importance of California emerging political geography as it straddles the major political fault lines of the state. Neither northern nor southern, neither coastal nor inland, and neither urban nor rural, San Benito illustrates the broad geographic forces shaping contemporary California politics.

**Keywords:** California politics, California political geography, California elections, San Benito County

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# San Benito County and California's Geopolitical Fault Lines

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On the night of the June 2010 primary election, the fate of Proposition 16, the “PG&E Initiative,” was one of few statewide contests that remained in doubt. Public polling on the measure had been sparse and it seemed that the outcome of this hotly contested measure could go either way. In San Francisco, where both the proponents and opponents prepared to celebrate their side's victory, tea leaves from across the state were read with optimism. Leading media outlets referred to the “see-saw” nature of the results and anticipated several days of drama as the results were reported (Glover 2010). Around 10:00 that night, a little over an hour after the polls closed, without fanfare or garnering much attention, San Benito County, the state's 42nd largest county, reported its results. San Benito voters opposed Proposition 16 by a narrow margin of 48 percent in favor to 52 percent opposed. And with that, the fate of the measure had been sealed. The measure would be defeated.

In a state the size of California, with nearly 17 million registered voters and twenty-three thousand voting precincts, the votes of a nonrandom subset of seven thousand voters in 54 precincts would seem somewhat trivial to the outcome. Indeed, only once in the past 30 years has a statewide ballot measure been close enough that the number of votes tallied in San Benito County were substantial enough to have affected the outcome of the election (a 1988 transportation bond in which San Benito's majority “yes” vote was not sufficient to propel the measure to passage). Yet, despite the irrelevance of San Benito County in affecting the outcomes of statewide elections, the county is remarkably relevant when it comes to predicting them. Savvy election observers know that staying up late into the night for the state's results to trickle in is rarely necessary. The PG&E measure was just another instance; the official statewide results certified 28 days after the election mirrored San Benito's election night returns.

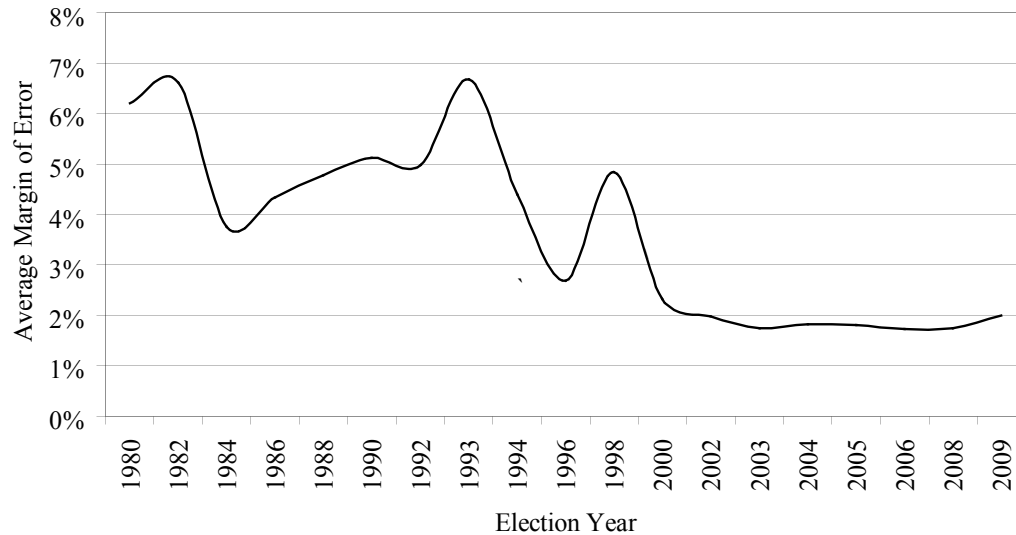
This paper delves into this political symmetry between the state and little San Benito County, the state's textbook bellwether county. Though not large enough to instigate or substantially influence emerging political realities in California, San Benito epitomizes the state's new geo-political alignments; San Benito straddles the major political fault lines of the state. Neither wholly north nor south, coastal nor inland, and neither urban nor rural, San Benito is not representative of the state's population in myriad ways yet neatly illustrates the broad geographic forces shaping contemporary California politics. And as such, San Benito offers some clues about California's future. Employing an original dataset that combines decades of county-level election returns with precinct-level results and block-level census data, we take up this issue in two parts. First, we examine San Benito's uniqueness from a macro-regional level to situate San Benito at the center of the state's broad political axes. Next, we build upon previous analyses of California's political geography by utilizing more granular data that enables a closer examination of the state's subregions and dissects the state's bellwether counties to further examine what it means to be "average" in contemporary California politics.

### **San Benito's Uncanny Predictive Powers**

San Benito's startling precision on Proposition 16 might appear to be a statistical anomaly. But during the past decade, San Benito compiled a 97 percent accuracy rate in predicting winners on ballot measures. And the average margin between the county and the state results on these 113 measures was exceptionally narrow—less than two percentage points separated the average outcome in San Benito from that of the remainder of California. This symmetry extends beyond propositions to statewide candidate races as well—in the 11 top-of-the-ticket statewide contests since 2000 (Presidential, Gubernatorial and Senatorial races), San Benito was even closer to the final statewide results. On average, San Benito results are within a single percentage point of the state on these races. Charts A and B, shown in the appendix, depict average county election results relative to the remainder of the state for ballot measures and candidate contests respectively.

Explanations for San Benito's uncanny capacity to be "average" are difficult to isolate and systematically test. It would be a quite simpler exercise to explain outlier counties like San Francisco or Modoc. Still, it is possible to draw some interesting inferences about statewide geographic, demographic, and political trends from this remarkable symmetry between state and county. An initial clue is that San Benito has only recently become one of California bellwether counties. As the chart below illustrates, San Benito ballot measure results recently began converging with those of the State and have consistently been within two percentage points of the state since the 2002 election.

**Chart 1. Average Difference Between San Benito County and California Statewide Ballot Propositions 1980-2009 (n=387)**



Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote* (1980-2009).

Charts C and D in the appendix illustrate the average county level distance from the statewide mean for ballot propositions contested during the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1980s, San Benito was the 22nd best fitting county compared to the state. In the 1990s, San Benito was only marginally better, ranking 19th. Note that not only was San Benito's median considerably further from the state during this decade, but the dispersion of the data far greater, indicating a greater lack of consistency in the spread. In a later section we will return to these data aggregated by region.

Part of the explanation for this phenomenon undoubtedly includes a demographic convergence between the county and state. San Benito is the state's second-fastest growing county over the past three decades, having doubled in population since 1980. San Benito's growth relates in large part to its proximity to Silicon Valley, a region that began its exponential growth after 1980. San Benito's largest urban area, Hollister, is home to three-fifths of the population. Hollister emerged as a growing bedroom community during the dot-com boom of the mid 1990s, having grown from 12,000 people in 1980 to an estimated 37,301 in 2010. San Benito's growth has been accompanied by increasing population diversity. According to 2010 census figures, the Latino population in San Benito County now comprises a majority of the population (United States Census Bureau 2010).

**Table 1. California and San Benito County Demographic Profiles**

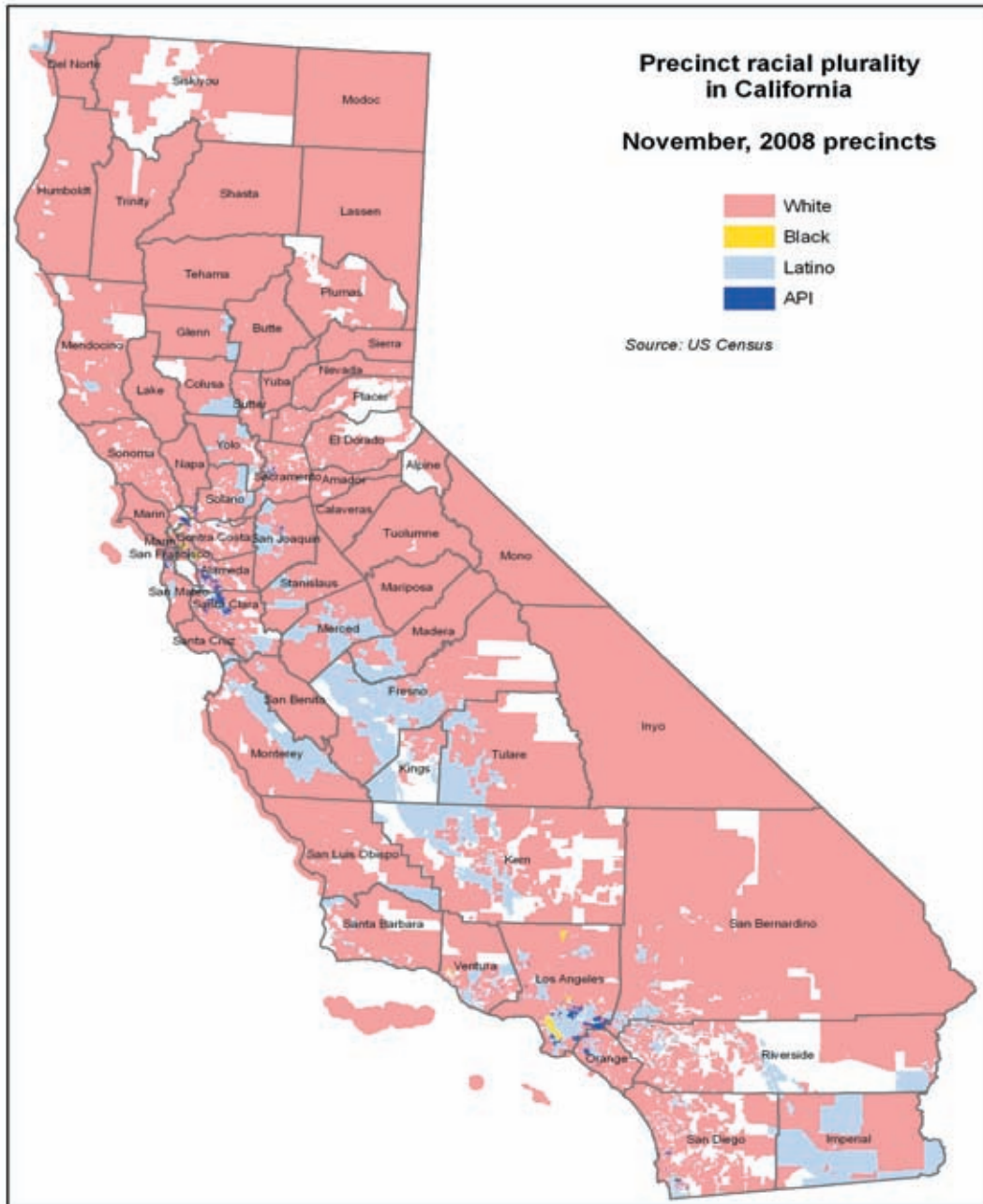
	California	San Benito
Racial Demography		
White, Non-Hispanic	42.3%	40.4%
Black	6.7%	1.3%
Asian and Pacific Islander	12.9%	3.6%
Latino	36.6%	53.8%
Foreign Born	26.2%	18.8%
Education Rates		
High School Graduate	76.8%	74.9%
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	26.6%	17.1%
Economic Indicators		
Homeownership Rate	56.9%	68.2%
Per Capita Income	\$22,711	\$20,932
Poverty Rate	13.3%	10.4%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010.

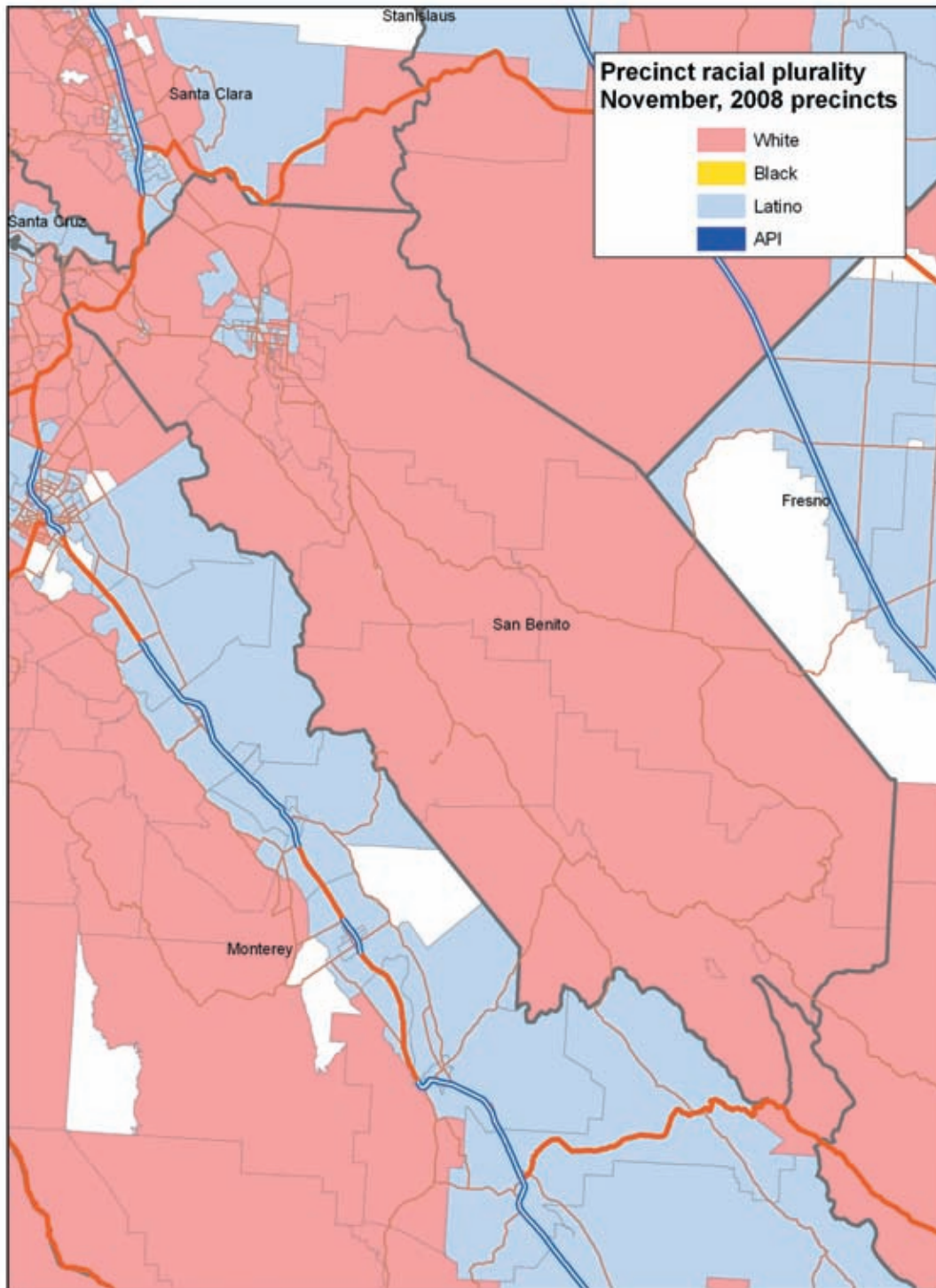
Still, San Benito's population is disproportionately white and Latino with only small amounts of other groups. The diversity index represents the likelihood that two randomly selected individuals within a geographic area would differ by race or ethnicity. California's diversity index is .661. San Benito's .558 score is only the 25th closest fit—better than most other small counties, but far behind counties like San Mateo and San Joaquin that closely mirror the state's population diversity or large southern California counties Orange, Riverside, San Diego, San Bernardino, Ventura, and Kern. As the table below indicates, San Benito's population varies substantially from that of the state as a whole with a substantially larger Latino population and tiny African-American and Asian and Pacific Islander communities.

Map 1 below maps block-level census data onto 2008 voting precincts to indicate the racial plurality of each voting district. The statewide map illustrates the diversity of the state's largest urban areas: Los Angeles, San Diego, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Sacramento, each of which contains plurality black and Asian precincts as well as Latino and white. Additionally, they reveal the high concentration of Latino populations in California's Central Valley. The county map shows that unlike its western neighbor, Monterey County, whose Latino population predominates on the more rural eastern border, San Benito precincts are predominantly

**Map 1. Racial Diversity in California and San Benito County Racial Plurality by Precinct**







Sources: United States Census Bureau. 2000; Shapefiles from Statewide Database, 2008.



white with the exception of Latino populations concentrated in and around the city of Hollister.

So while population diversity undoubtedly tells part of the story, San Benito's population mix does not nearly match California's. Instead, what San Benito does have is a near perfect mix of California's new political geography—a relatively liberal north western urban core and conservative southeastern rural areas.

### **California's New Political Geography**

The growing literature on California's unique and evolving political geography offers considerable insight into the transformation of the Golden State. As Douzet and Miller show, the state's political axis has realigned along a new east vs. west divide instead of the traditional north vs. south as "California's demographic and cultural shifts of the past generation have produced a partisan realignment along regional lines" (Douzet and Miller 2008: 28) where Democrats reign on the coast and Republicans have better electoral fortunes in inland areas.

As Table 2 indicates, over the past three decades, both major parties have experienced substantial declines in their proportion of registrants statewide. Conversely, independent voters who "Decline to State" a partisan affiliation have proliferated, leading one leading scholar to label California an "unparty state" (Baldassare 2002). Statewide, the decline of party identifiers has been more precipitous for Democrats than Republicans. Though the northern and southern counties de-aligned at different rates, i.e., the south turned sharply rightward in the 1980s, the cumulative change over three decades is nearly identical.

Conversely, Table 3 above reveals an emerging fissure between the coastal and inland counties. In the 1980s and the 1990s, Republican gained 19 percentage points relative to Democrats in party registration in inland counties. Both parties lost sizeable proportions of registrants in the coastal counties, but the inland areas moved both away from the Democrats and also toward the Republicans.

At the macro level, it is certainly true that "the dramatic changes of the last generation have blurred the divisions between northern and southern California while accentuating differences between the coastal and inland regions" (Douzet and Miller 2008: 9; see also Kousser 2009, Douzet 2008, and Cain, Hui, and MacDonald 2008). Though it is far less common than in previous decades, and has been overwhelmed by coastal/inland divide, some north-south splits still remain as in the 2010 primary elections for Lt. governor illustrated in Map 2. However, that this tends to occur in primary elections suggests that it likely results from differing levels of name recognition across the state rather than clear and consistent divisions in voter attitudes or lingering north/south rivalries. Still, north/south splits persist on

**Table 2. Regional Changes in Party Registration North vs. South Breakdown**

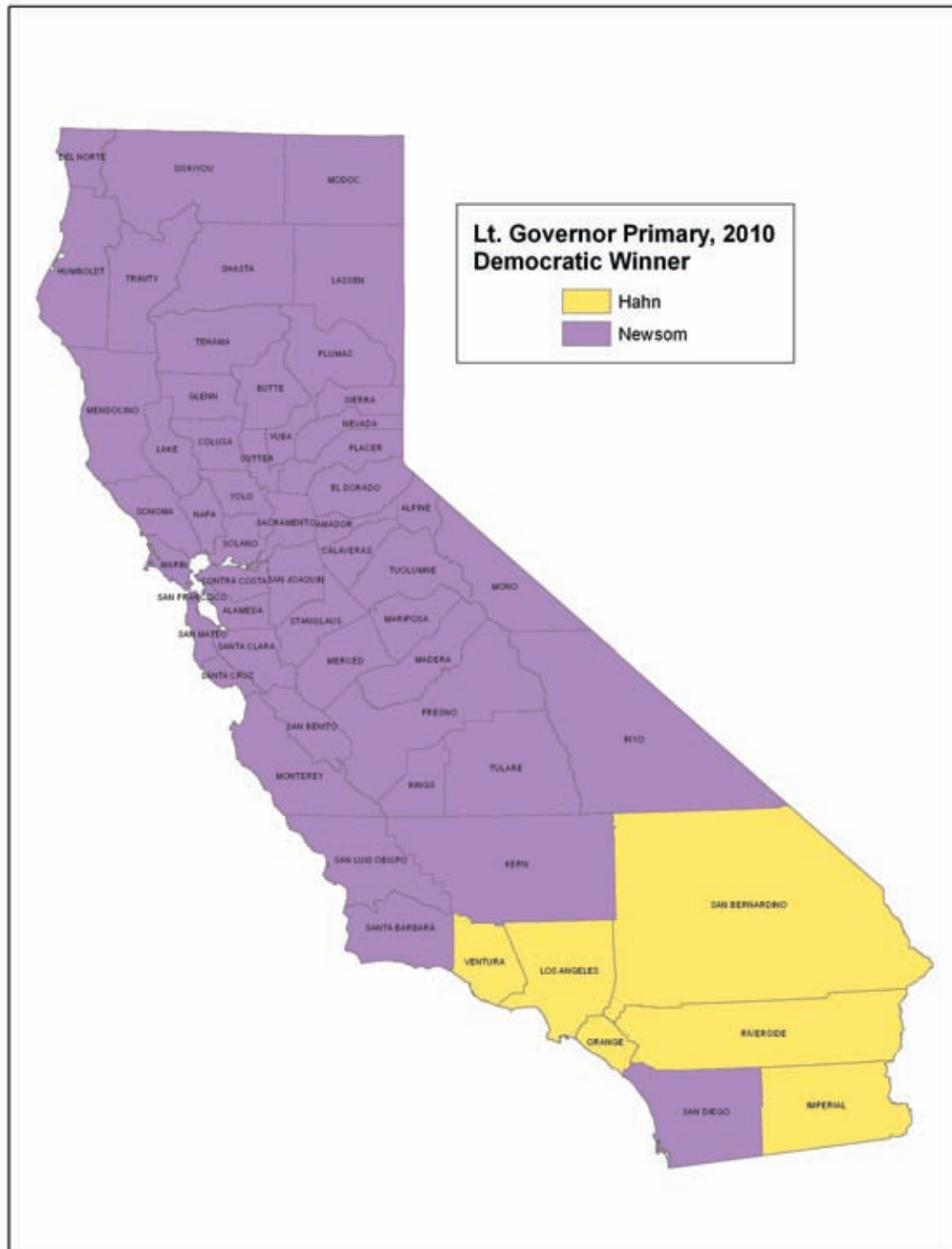
		<b>Democratic Registration</b>	<b>Republican Registration</b>	<b>Independent Registration</b>
<b>State</b>	1980-1990	-0.037	0.045	-0.006
	1990-2000	-0.041	-0.043	0.053
	2000-2010	-0.009	-0.041	0.058
	1980-2010	-0.087	-0.039	0.105
<b>North</b>	1980-1990	-0.014	0.026	-0.010
	1990-2000	-0.063	-0.021	0.051
	2000-2010	-0.007	-0.040	0.055
	1980-2010	-0.084	-0.036	0.096
<b>South</b>	1980-1990	-0.055	0.061	-0.003
	1990-2000	-0.024	-0.060	0.054
	2000-2010	-0.010	-0.043	0.060
	1980-2010	-0.088	-0.042	0.111

**Table 3. Regional Changes in Party Registration Coastal vs. Inland Breakdown**

		<b>Democratic Registration</b>	<b>Republican Registration</b>	<b>Independent Registration</b>
<b>Coastal</b>	1980-1990	-0.033	0.039	-0.004
	1990-2000	-0.029	-0.061	0.057
	2000-2010	-0.002	-0.048	0.060
	1980-2010	-0.064	-0.070	0.114
<b>Inland</b>	1980-1990	-0.050	0.061	-0.010
	1990-2000	-0.074	0.005	0.041
	2000-2010	-0.022	-0.030	0.055
	1980-2010	-0.146	0.036	0.086

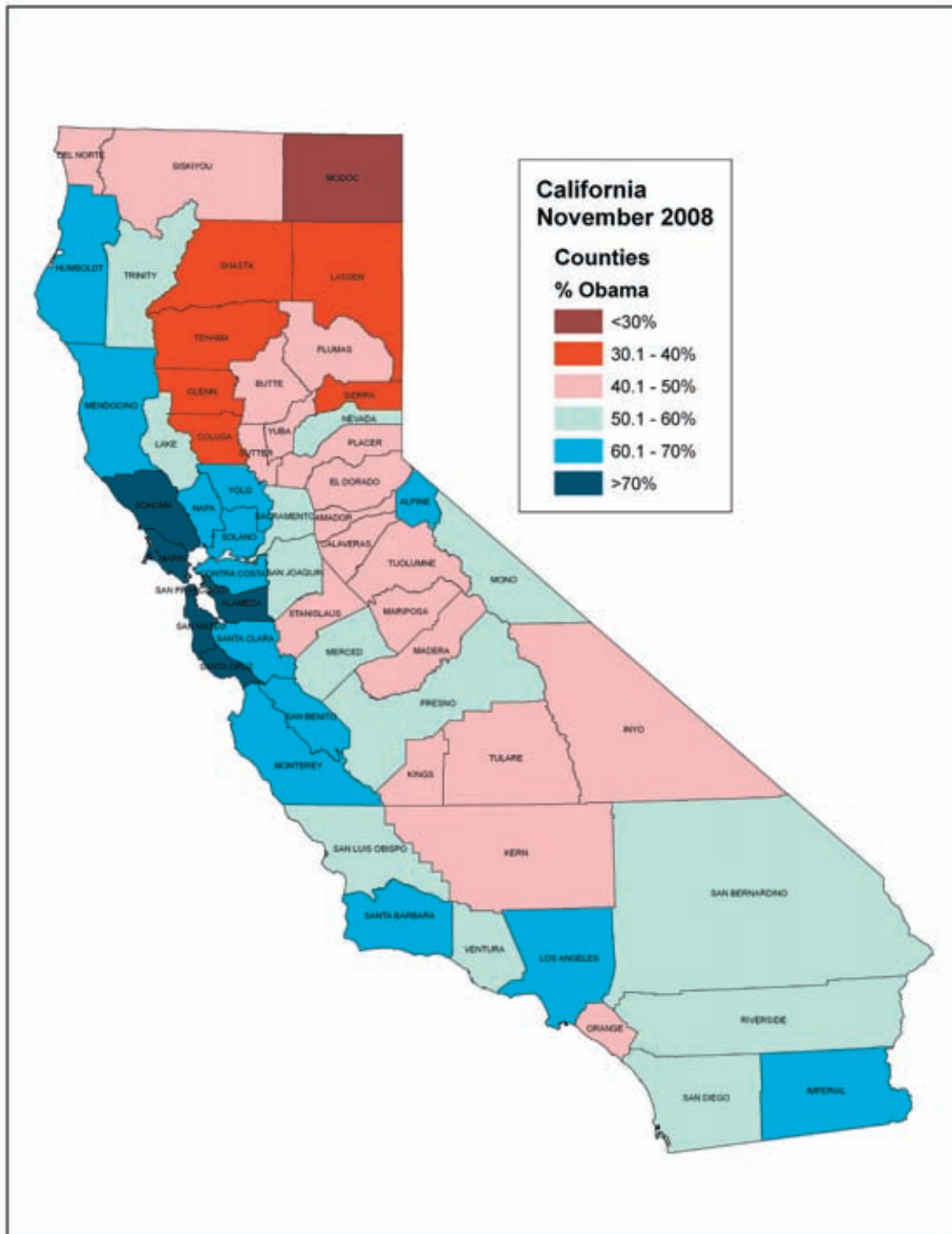
Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote* (1980-2008).

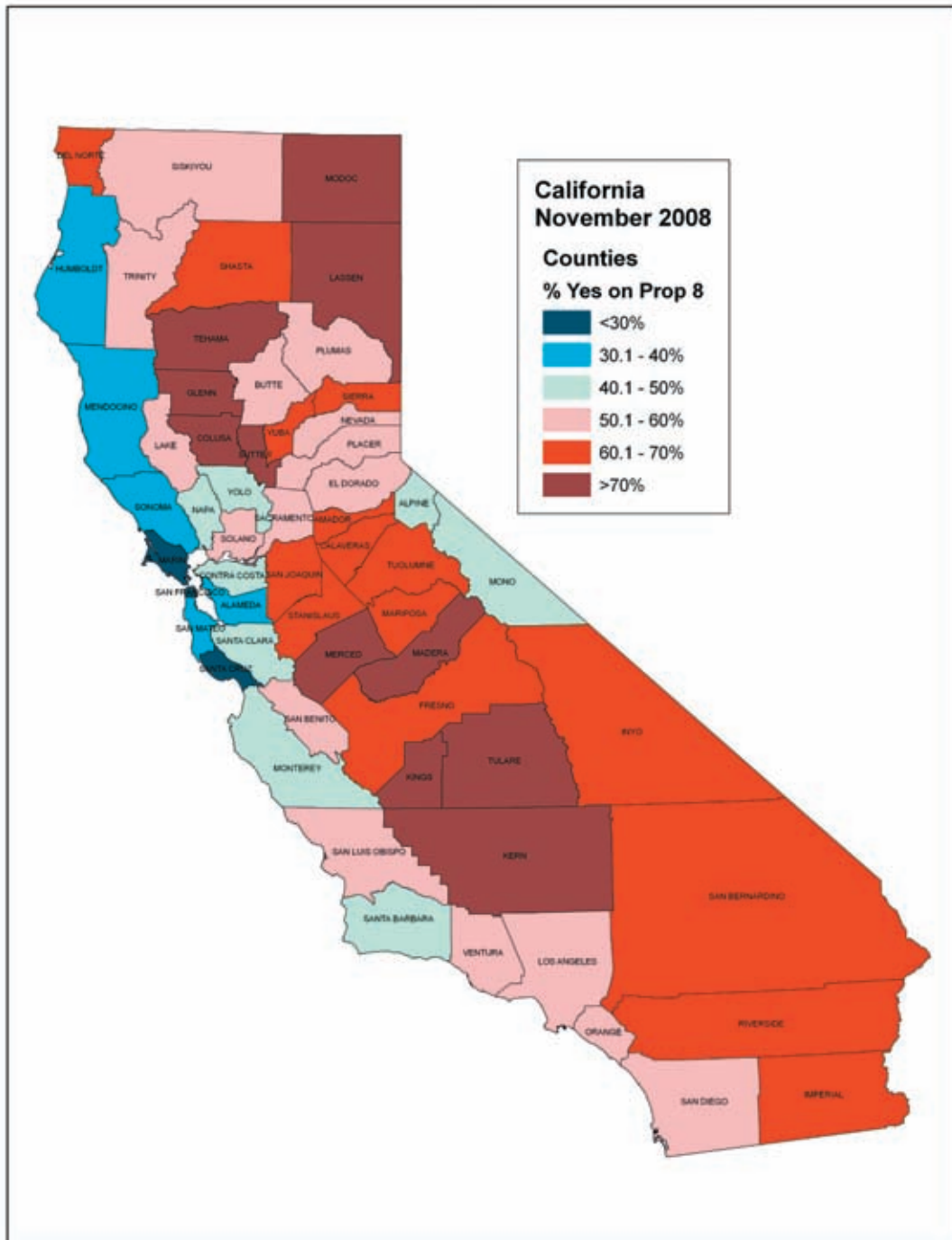
**Map 2. 2010 Primary Election: Lt. Governor Results**



<http://www.bepress.com/cjpp/vol3/iss1/3>  
DOI: 10.2202/1944-4370.1116

**Map 3. 2008 Vote for President and Propositions 8 by California County**





Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote* 2008 General Election.



particular issues, including water policy (see Skelton 2009). A test of this will be the still-as-yet-unscheduled water bond measure.

In the 2008 elections, the coastal/inland divide was clearly paramount. In addition to the presidential election, the 2008 ballot featured Proposition 8 which invalidated same sex marriage in California. Map 3 depicts a now fairly stable east/west divide in California politics.

Still, the notion of a coastal/inland divide suggests far greater exactness than exists. As the maps show, and the lighter blue hue suggests, some counties appear to straddle this imprecise political fault line. And these counties have increasingly become California's political bellwethers.

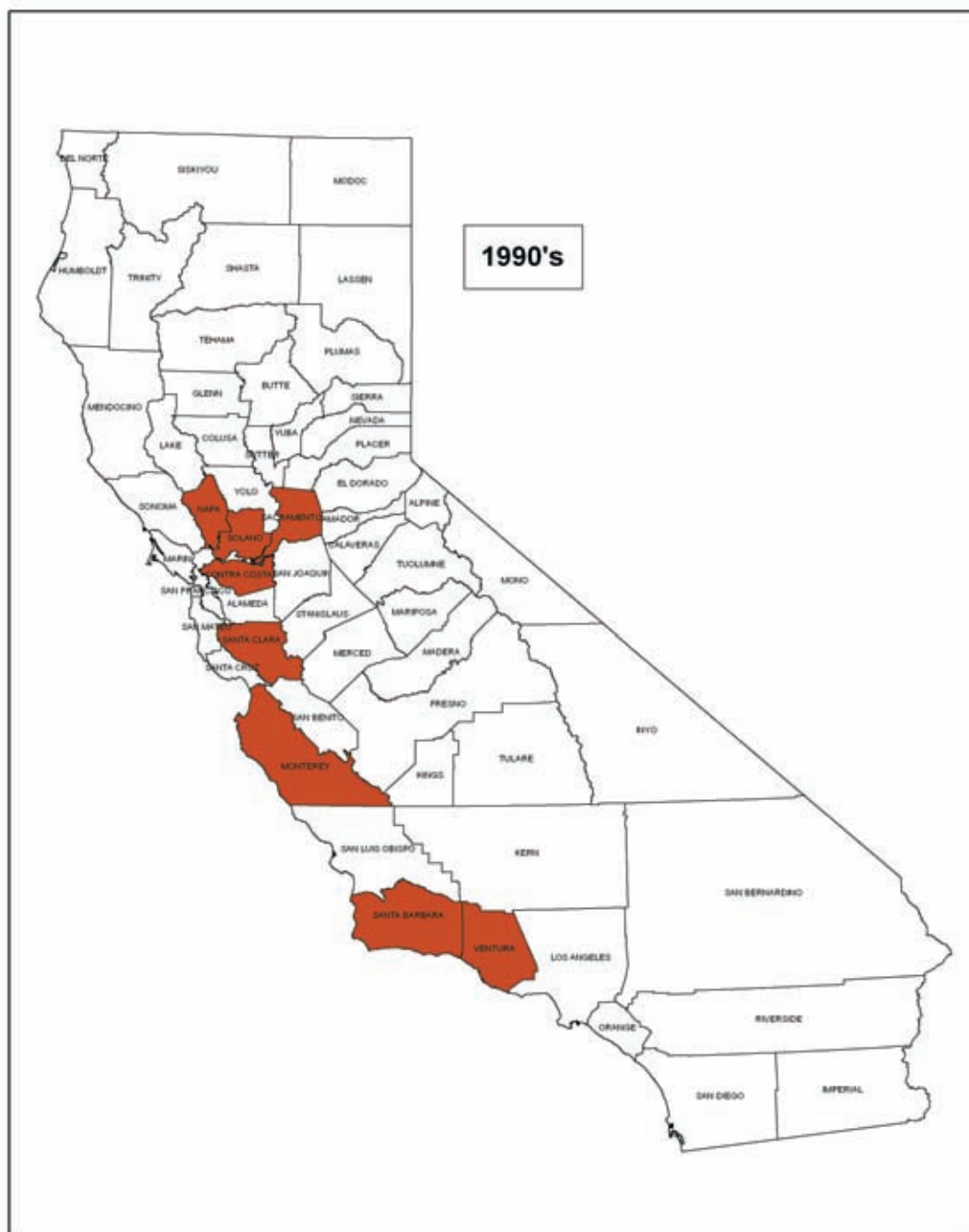
To illustrate this, we construct three maps of California's bellwether counties. These are identified as the eight counties with the smallest average difference between the county and the remainder of the state by decade both on ballot propositions and candidate elections. Map 4 illustrates the changing location of these bellwether counties. While five of the eight counties in 1980 were coastal counties, by the 2000s, six of the best predictors were inland northern California counties ringing the greater San Francisco Bay Area. The only two outliers are also the only two counties that made the bellwether list in all three decades: Santa Barbara and Ventura.

### **California's Regional Political Geography**

This emerging concentration of bellwether counties around the greater Bay Area suggests that broad dichotomies of coastal/inland and north/south might obscure rather than clarify regional political alignments in California. Deconstructing these axes into regions reveals substantial variation. Chart E, in the appendix, depicts partisan registration figures for each county by decade and documents the steep decline of Democratic registrants in many California counties and the concomitant increase in "Decline to State" voters. Aggregating these county level results to the regional level and comparing them to the state average, as we do in Charts 2 and 3 below, elucidates some interesting trends. Only Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area were disproportionately Democratic in the 1980s and have become increasingly so in the decades since. The Central Coast, once a Republican stronghold, has moved consistently toward the state mean. Meanwhile, Republican gains relative to the state have increased in the North East region of the state and in the Central Valley. Tiny San Benito County is pushed and pulled by these trends; it straddles the Central Coast to the west, Central Valley to the east, and Bay Area to the North.

**Map 4. California Bellwether Counties by Decade 1980-2009**

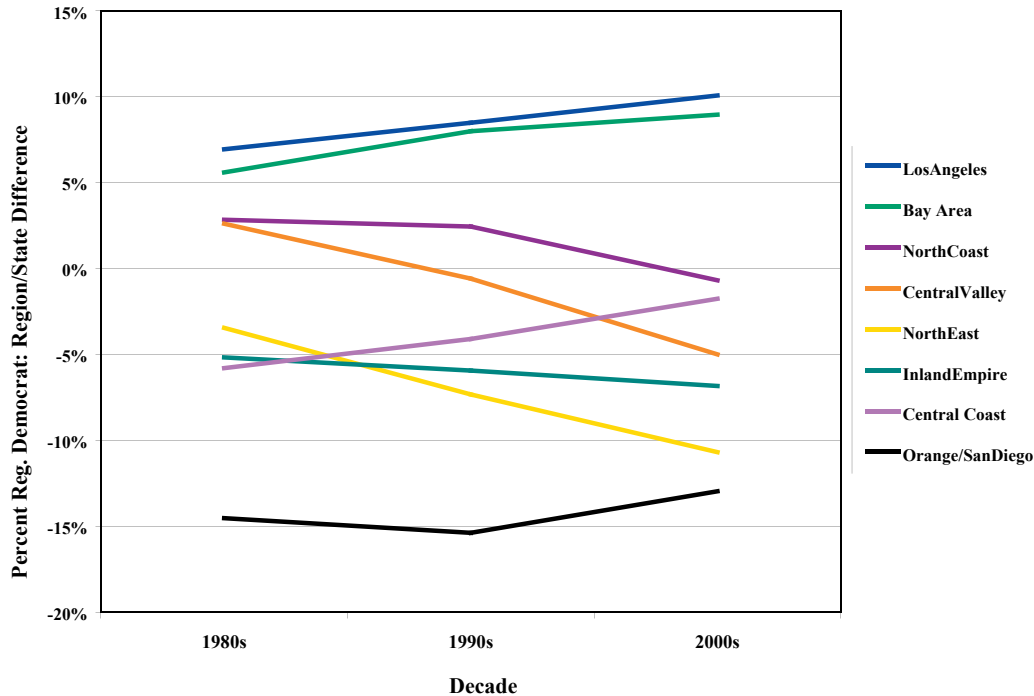






Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote* (1980-2008).

**Chart 2. Regional Democratic Registration Compared to the State by Decade**



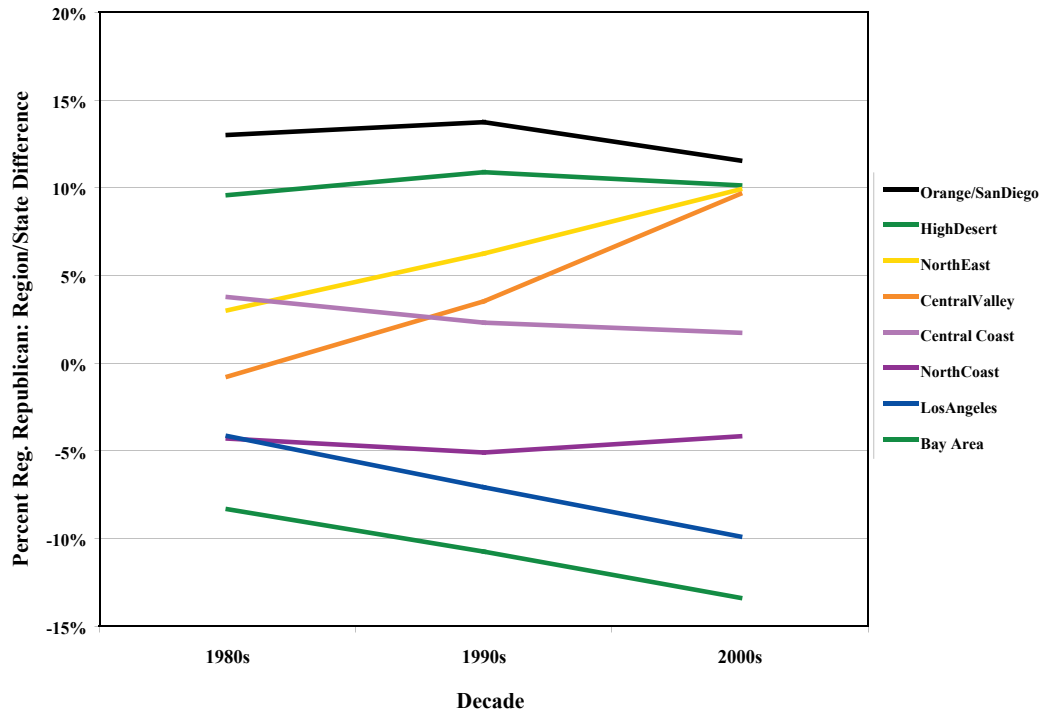
Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote* (1980-2009).

Charts F and G in the appendix demonstrate how these partisan affiliations translate into voting behavior on top-of-the-ticket races in California. Only six counties voted increasingly more Democratic during the past three decades relative to the state: conservative Orange, Mono, and Ventura counties, relatively liberal Monterey and Los Angeles, and San Benito which edged slightly closer to the state mean. Conversely, 22 counties moved in a consistently more conservative direction away from the rest of the state. At the regional level, the hard right turn of voters in the Central Valley, Foothills, and North Coast is easy visible, as is the unexpected liberalism of Inland Empire voters in the past decade.

### California's Intra-Regional Political Geography

Despite the considerable scholarly attention paid to the political geography of California, comparatively little research connects the broader macro-level realign-

**Chart 3. Regional Republican Registration Compared to the State by Decade**



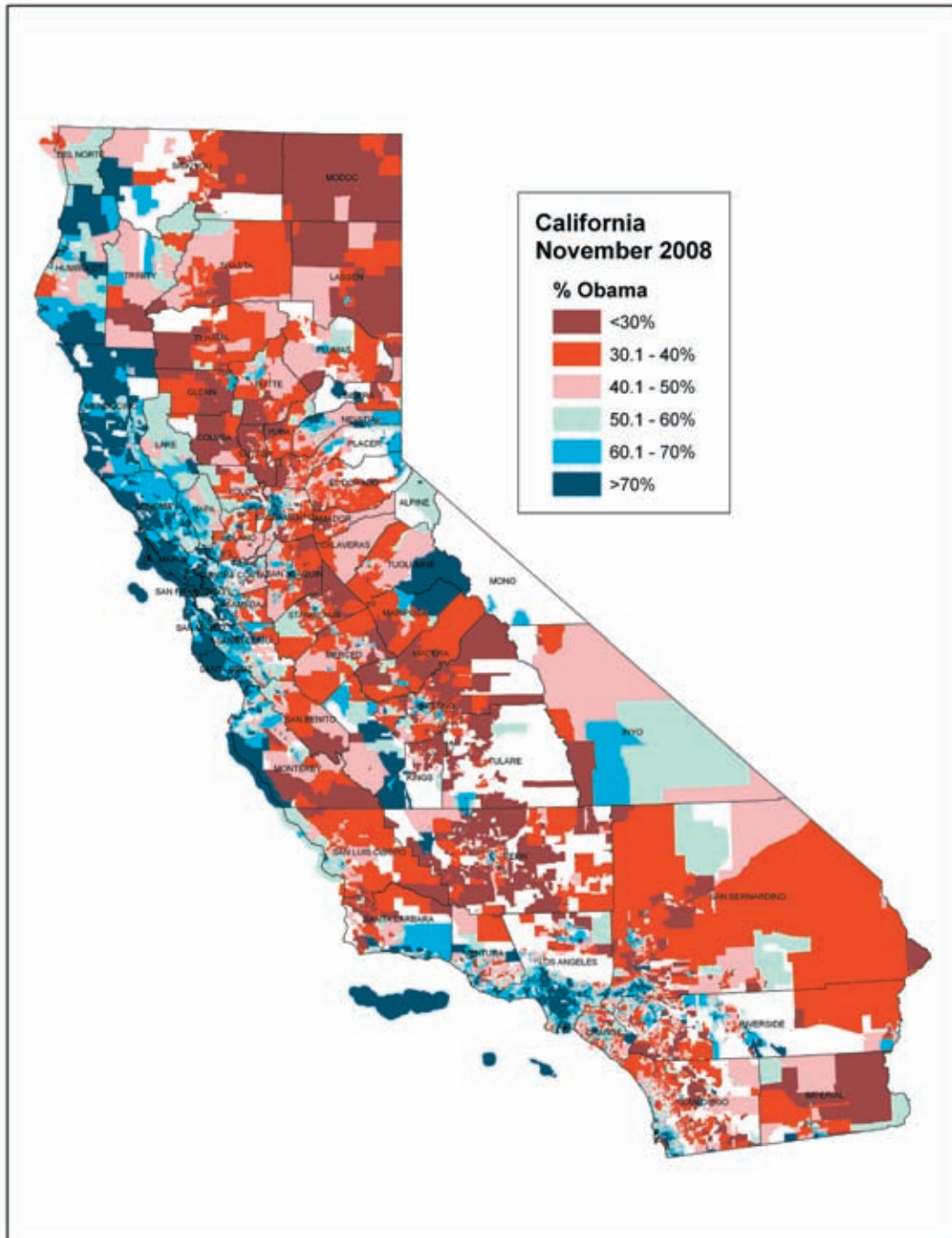
Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote* (1980-2009).

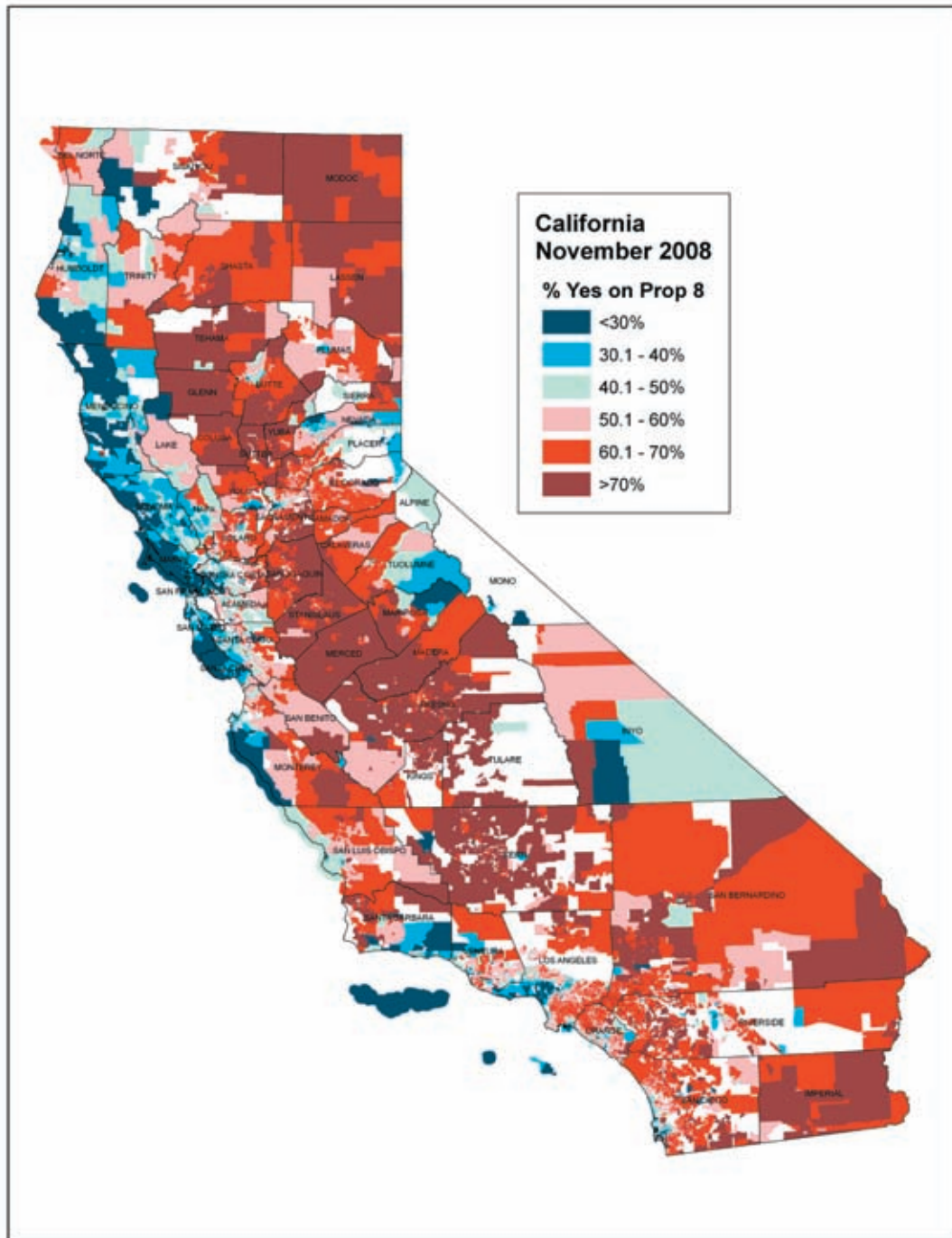
ments with micro-level geographic changes. To illustrate how county level results obfuscate some of the intraregional voting patterns, recall Maps 2 and 3 above which depict statewide results by county for the 2010 primary and 2008 election, respectively. County-level results effectively show the two fault lines of California: north/south and east/west. Bellwether counties, as might be expected, appear in these maps as moderate relative to the state. Only by employing precinct level data can we observe the third geographic fault line in California.

Map 5 utilizes precinct level data provided by the Institute of Governmental Studies' Statewide Database and county Statements of the Vote. It shows the intense concentration of progressive voters on California's coast and conservative voters inland. But it also reveals that the liberal coastline is thinner than county level maps might suggest and that there are some unexpected pockets of Obama voters in the Central Valley and northeastern parts of the state. In fact, it appears that some precincts in conservative bastions like Orange County, Inyo County, Tulare County, and Kern County that voted solidly against the prohibition on same sex marriage.



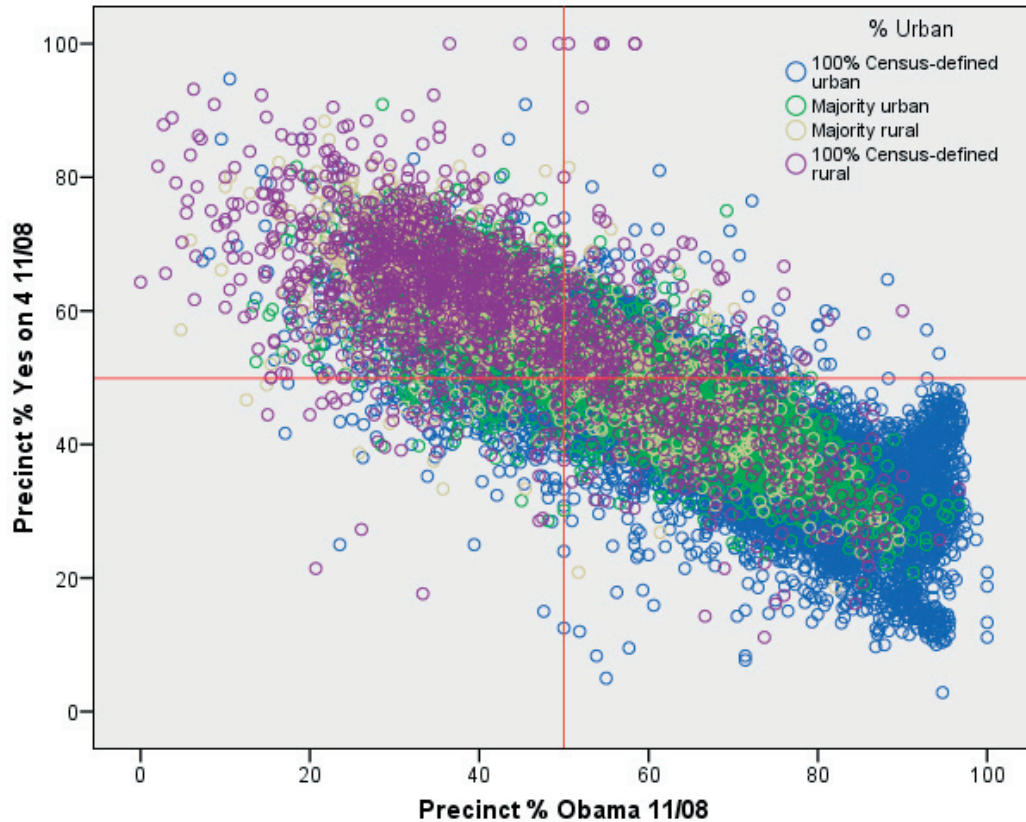
**Map 5. 2008 Vote for President and Propositions 8 by California Precinct**





Source: IGS Statewide Database and County Statements of the Vote, November 2008 General Election.

**Chart 4. 2008 Precinct Level Results: Presidential Election and Proposition 4**

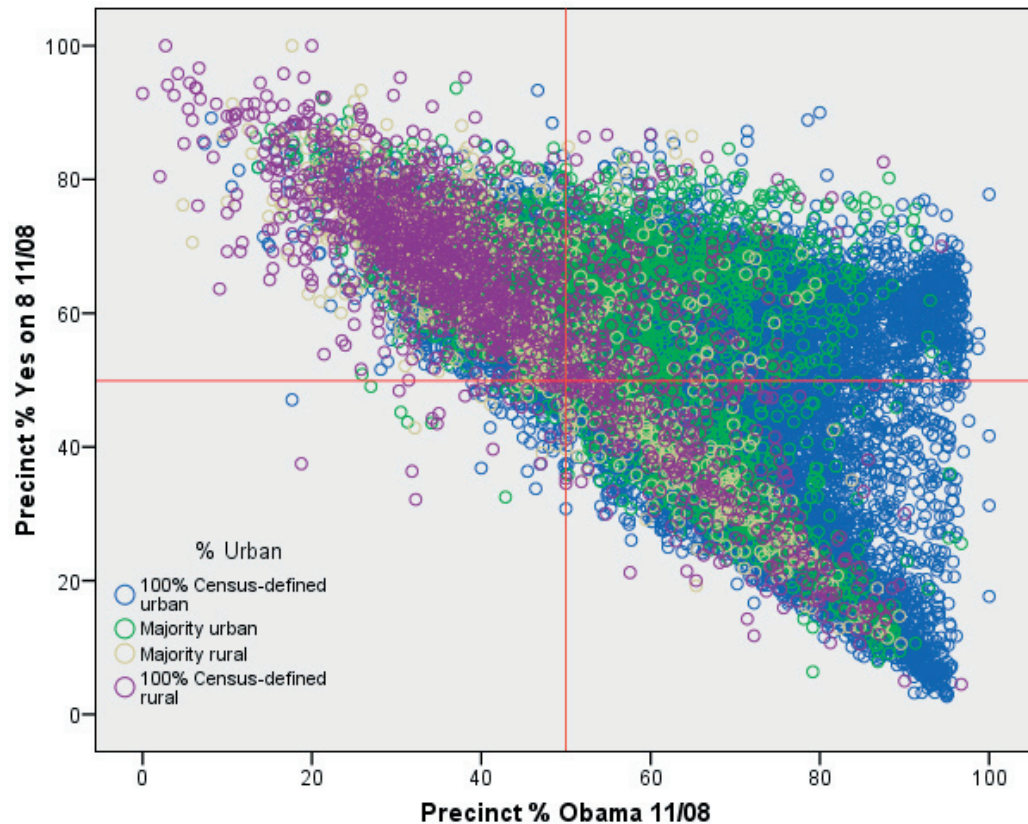


Source: Cook and Latterman 2010.

While the coastal/inland divide is reaffirmed through the precinct level maps, an urban/rural split also comes into focus. Charts 4 and 5 show statewide precinct level results for the 2008 presidential election and the two socially division measures on the ballot—Propositions 4 (parental notification of abortion) and 8 (same sex marriage). Precincts are color-coded according to their urban/rural definition according to the United States Census. Though the shape of the charts differs (see Cook and Latterman 2010 for a fuller discussion) the political polarization of urban and rural is readily apparent.

Table 4 indicates the average proportion of the vote garnered by the Democratic candidate in past presidential elections in California. Quite simply, the urban/rural split in California is a profound one. While California's largest cities are extreme Democratic outliers, what is perhaps most notable is the minimal difference between small cities of less than 5,000 inhabitants and large cities up to half a

**Chart 5. 2008 Precinct Level Results: Presidential Election and Proposition 8**



Source: Cook and Latterman 2010.

million. The gap between rural unincorporated places and even small cities is quite substantial, particularly in the past two presidential elections, indicating the sharp division between urban and rural areas in California.

San Benito County's leading city, Hollister has been a Democratic stronghold; Democratic candidates have won around 64 percent of the vote in Hollister in each of the last three elections. But the remainder of the county is conservative, in some places overwhelmingly so. Map 6 shows the vote for president and Proposition 8 in San Benito County. While San Benito's particularly geography is unique, a precinct-level analysis of the other bellwether counties reveals similar patterns: far from being uniformly moderate, these places exhibit sizeable intra-county variations between urban and rural. Indeed it seems that what makes these counties accurate predictors of the state results is not only their placement along the east/west and north/south divides, but also their relative mix of urban and rural populations.



**Table 4. Average Proportion of the Vote for the Democratic Nominee for President By City Size 1992–2008**

	<b>2008</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>1992</b>
Unincorp. Rural	0.513	0.452	0.446	0.475	0.523
Unincorp. Urban*	0.556	0.478	0.505	0.518	0.527
Under 5,000	0.613	0.568	0.531	0.558	0.595
5,000-9,999	0.610	0.532	0.506	0.528	0.557
10,000-29,999	0.608	0.541	0.545	0.557	0.561
30,000-49,999	0.616	0.528	0.526	0.471	0.555
50,000-79,999	0.594	0.513	0.527	0.541	0.537
80,000-149,999	0.608	0.546	0.575	0.581	0.586
150,000-499,999	0.637	0.547	0.572	0.597	0.603
500,000+	0.750	0.695	0.710	0.702	0.706

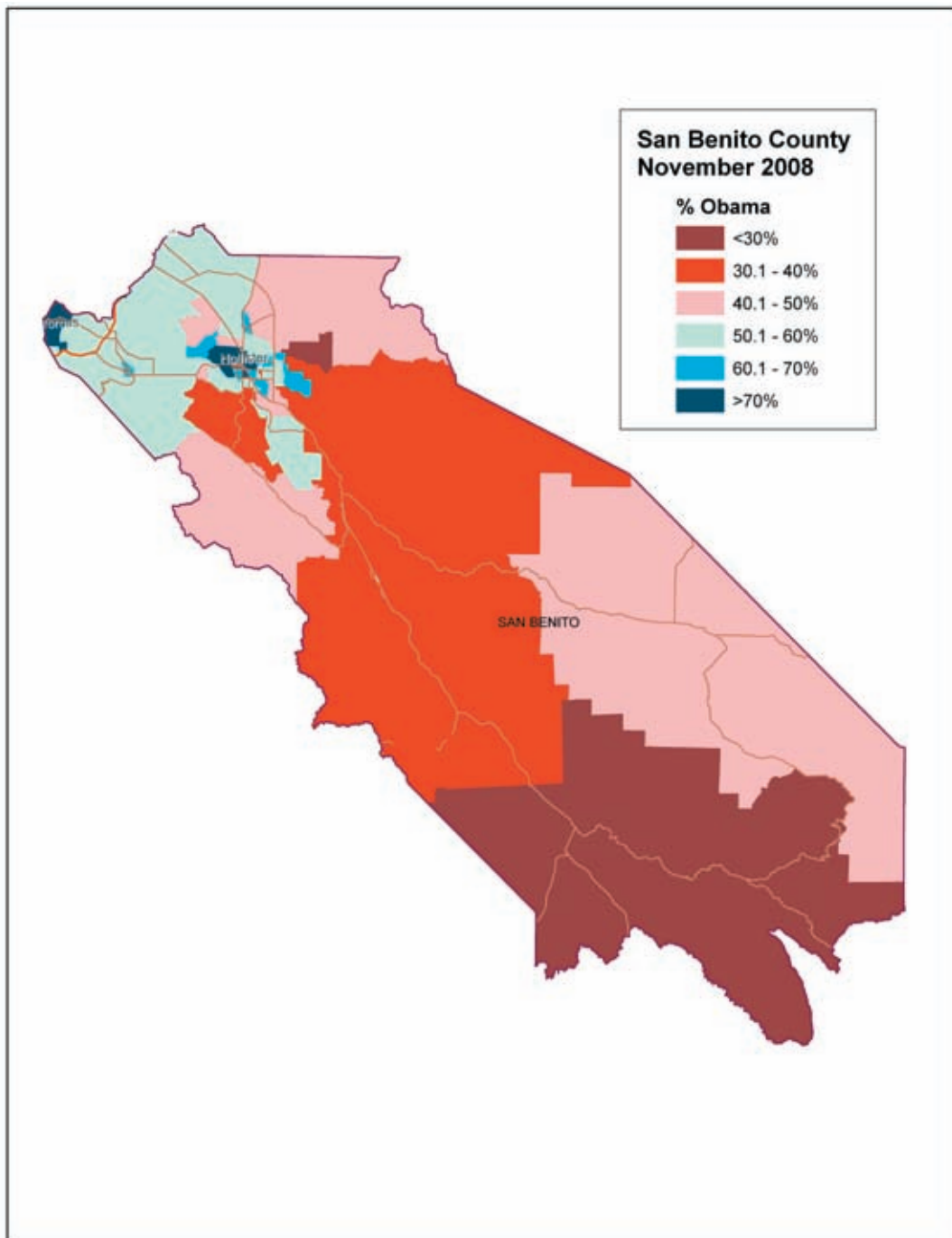
\*Note: Unincorp. Urban includes unincorporated areas in California's eight most heavily urban counties: Alameda; Los Angeles; Orange; Riverside; Sacramento; San Diego; San Francisco; and Santa Clara.

Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote*, Ingram and Franco (2006).

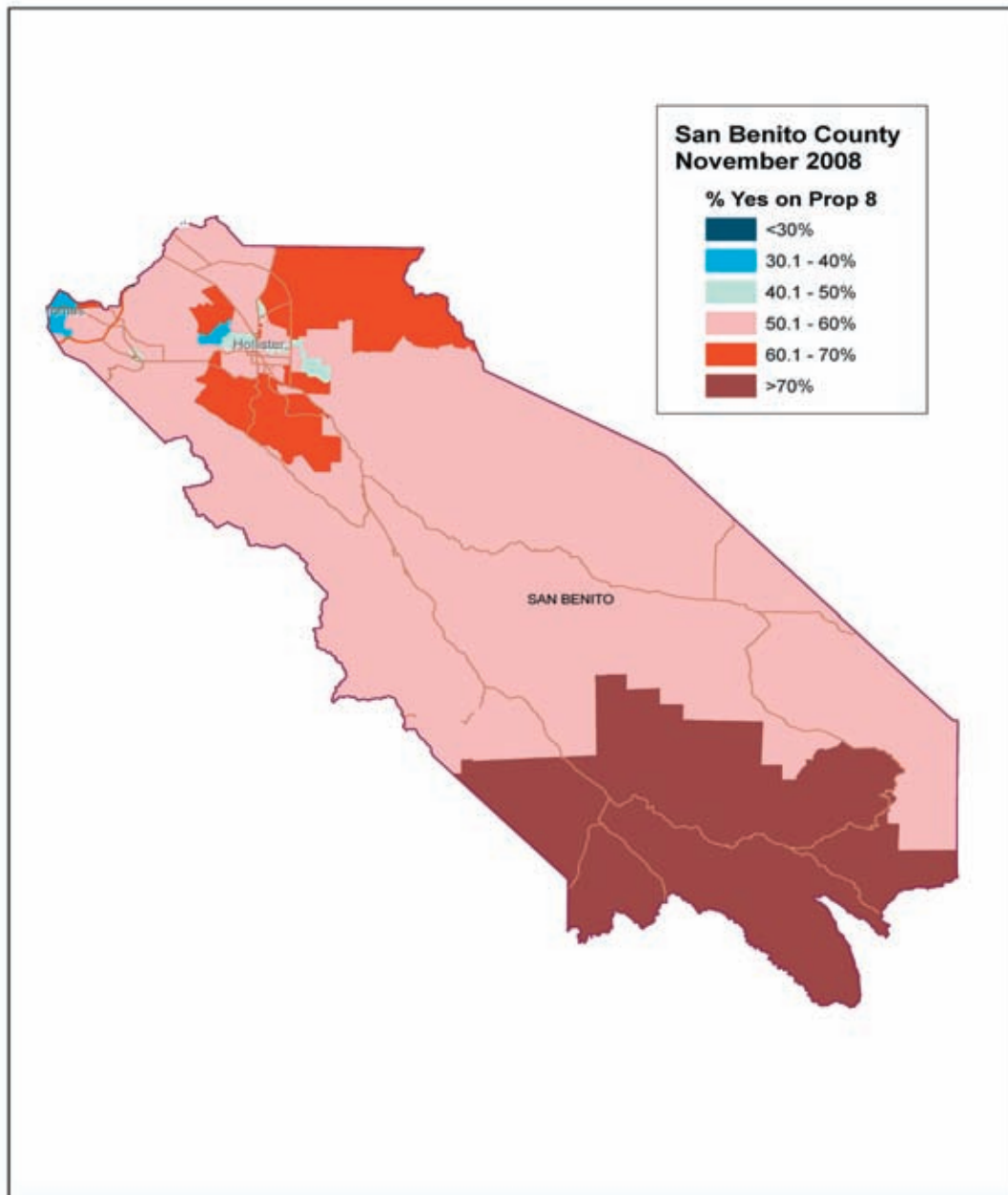
In short, what distinguishes San Benito from Fresno County is the relative position of San Benito on the fault line dividing the Central Coast, Central Valley, and Bay Area. But what distinguishes it from a place like Modoc County is its position on the fault line between urban and rural California.

To the extent that California's coastal areas tend to be urban and inland areas tend to be rural, the east/west axis fairly accurately describes California's political geography. However, San Benito County suggests that a more nuanced view is necessary. Map 7 provides visual depictions of the 2008 presidential election in Solano County, Sacramento County, and Contra Costa County, three other bellwether counties. As is the case in San Benito, these counties contain a mixture of urban and rural populations. In Solano, Democrats dominate the cities of Vallejo (76% for Obama), Suisun City (71%), Benicia (67%), and Fairfield (65%) and perform well in Vacaville (55%) and Dixon (54%), but overwhelmingly lose the remainder of the county. In Sacramento County, outside of city limits (74% for Obama) the county resembles the heart of the Central Valley. And in Contra Costa County, every city supported Obama with at least 55% of the vote. But Richmond (89% for Obama) San Pablo (88%), and El Cerrito (87%) led the pack, with Pittsburgh, Hercules, Pinnole, and Antioch (all over 70%) close behind. Again, the rural parts of the county countervailed.

**Map 6. 2008 Vote for President and Proposition 8 by San Benito Precinct**

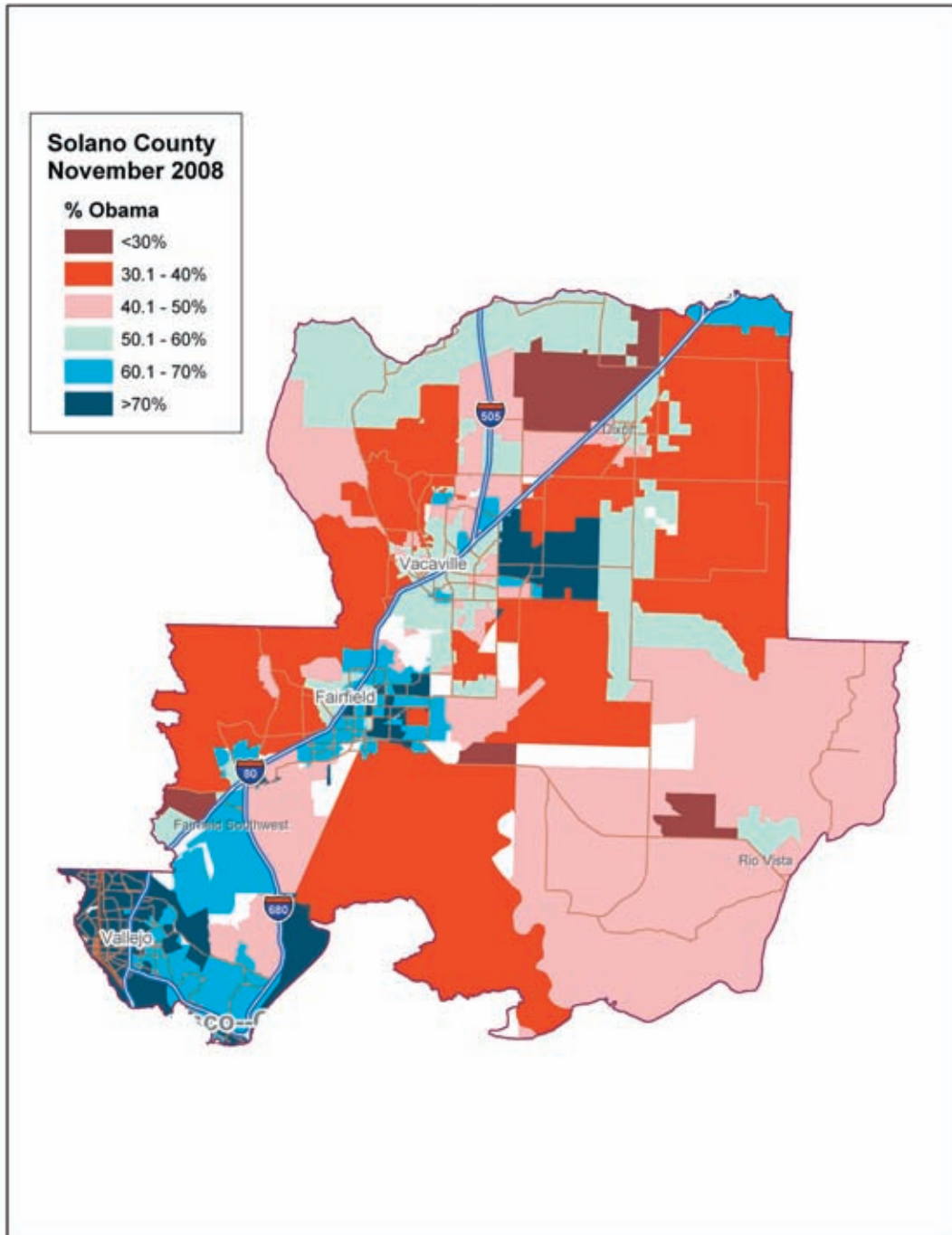


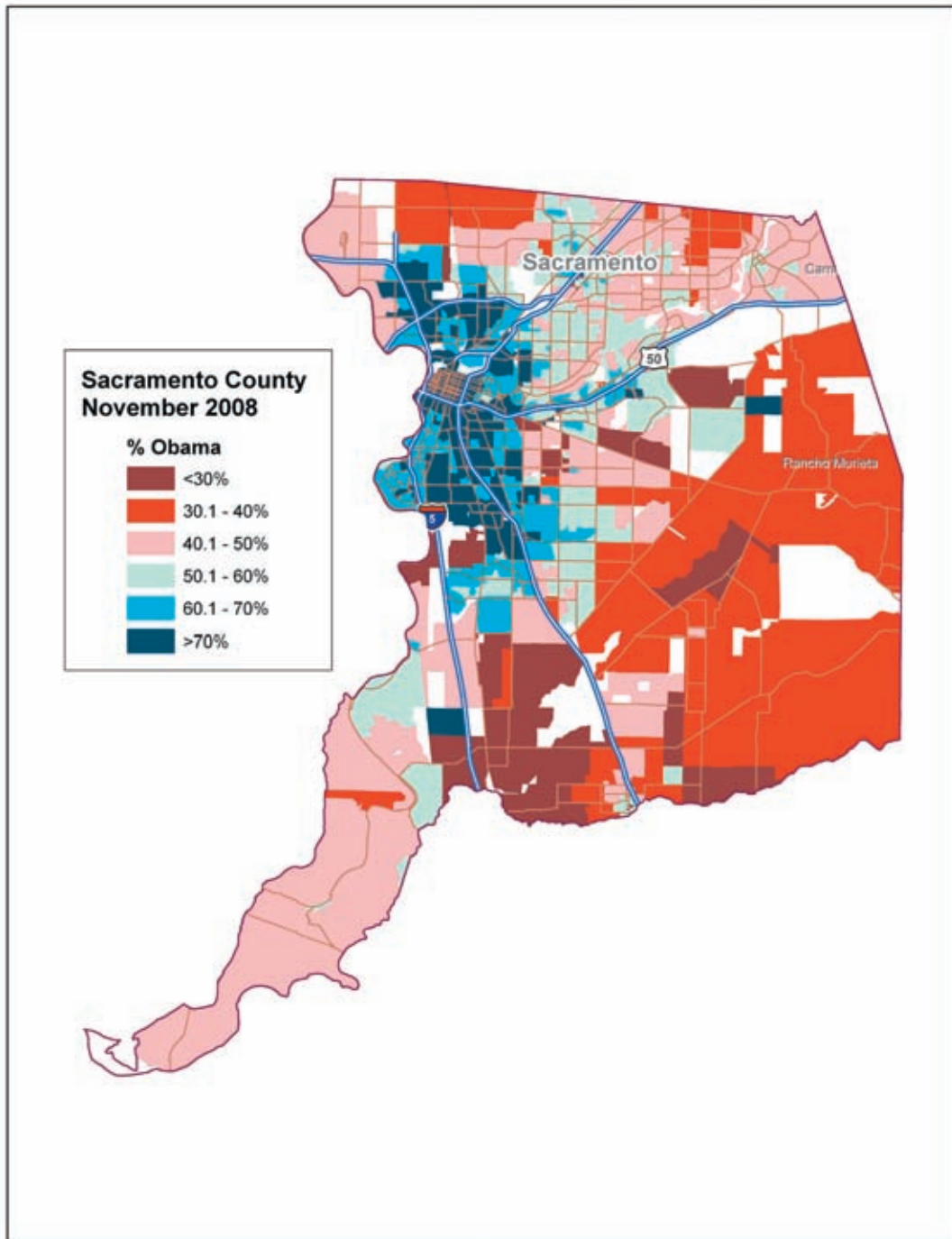


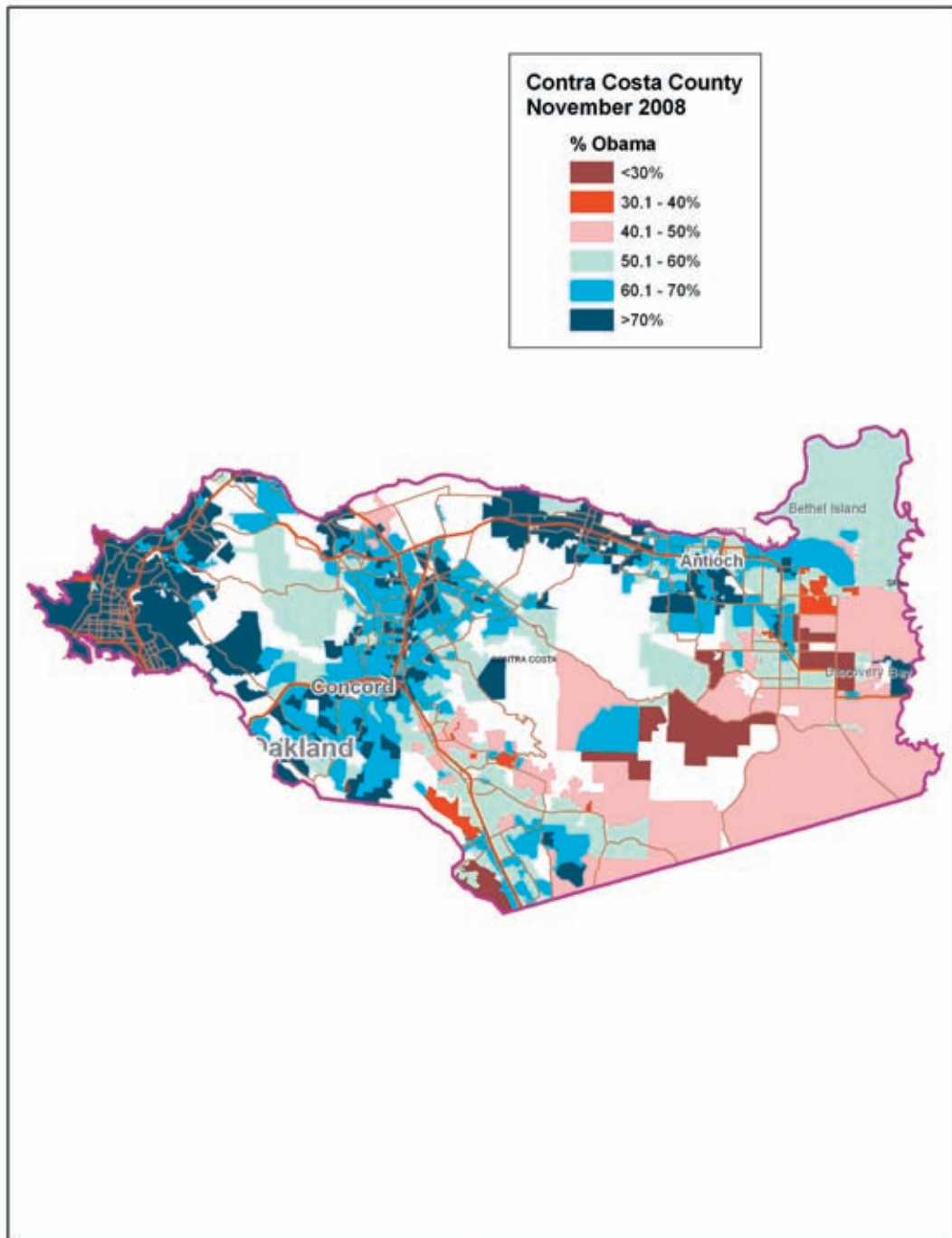


Source: Institute of Governmental Studies Statewide Database and County Statements of the Vote, November 2008 General Election.

**Map 7. 2008 Vote for President by Precinct: Solano, Sacramento, and Contra Costa**







Source: Statewide Database and County Statements of the Vote, November 2008 General Election.

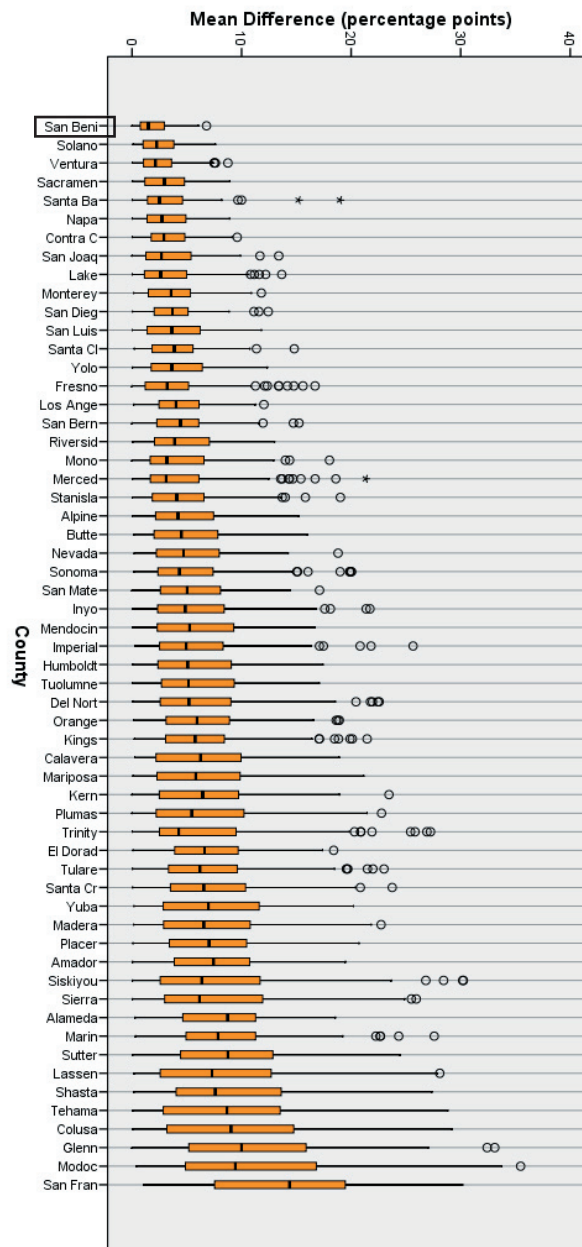
### **San Benito and California's Political Future**

San Benito County is a godsend for political junkies who want to know election results and yet get a decent night's sleep. Yet more than that, the phenomenon of San Benito is a reflection of the changing political geography of California and the cleavages that dominate its politics: north vs. south, east vs. west, and urban vs. rural. Only by examining the internal political geography of the bellwether counties do we get a sense of the state's full geopolitical picture. The self-sorting that occurs at the regional level (See Cain, Hui, and MacDonald, 2008) is similarly occurring within regions.

Extrapolating from past elections to future ones is a risky venture, particularly given our limited understanding of the causal mechanism at play: whether urban areas independently affect individual preferences and voting behavior or simply attract those voters who already prefer liberal causes and progressive candidates. However, we reluctantly offer one observation. Despite what appears to be a sour mood toward their national political party, California Democrats have to take some solace in Chart 4 above. In the past five presidential elections, Republicans have only been competitive in the rural parts of the state. Even the smallest cities are, on average, more likely to support the Democratic candidate. And it's hard to imagine California's rural population increasing substantially while retaining its rural character.

## Appendix

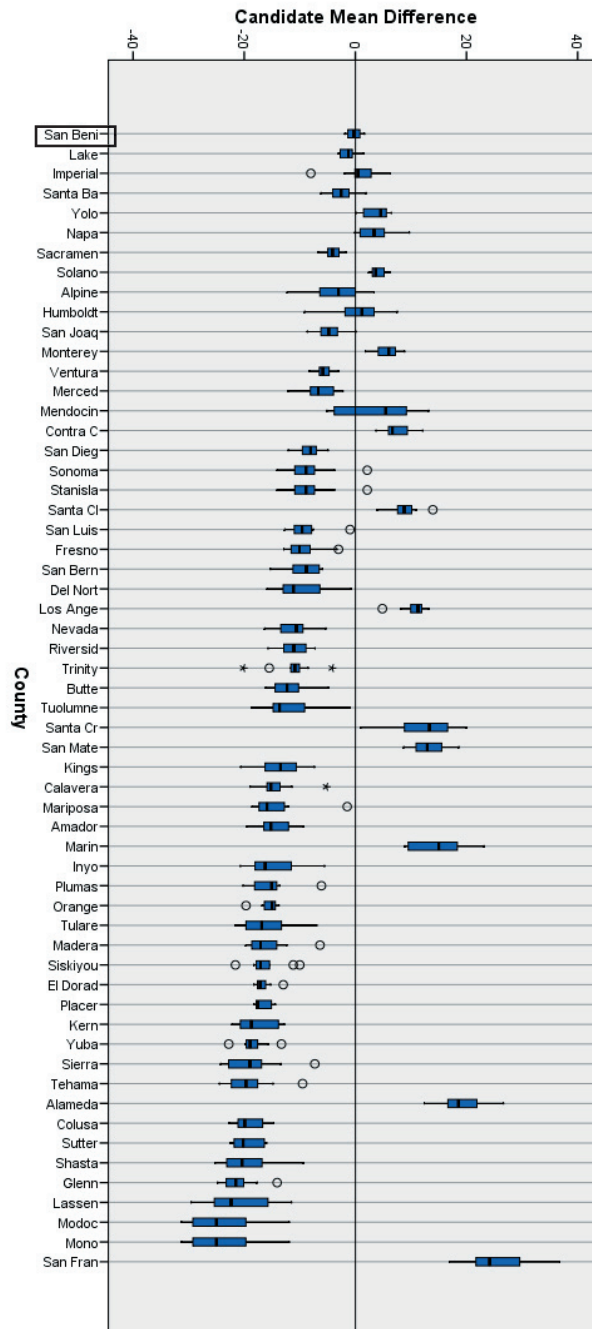
**Chart A. California Ballot Propositions 2000-2009  
Box Plots (n=113)**



Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote* (2000-2009).

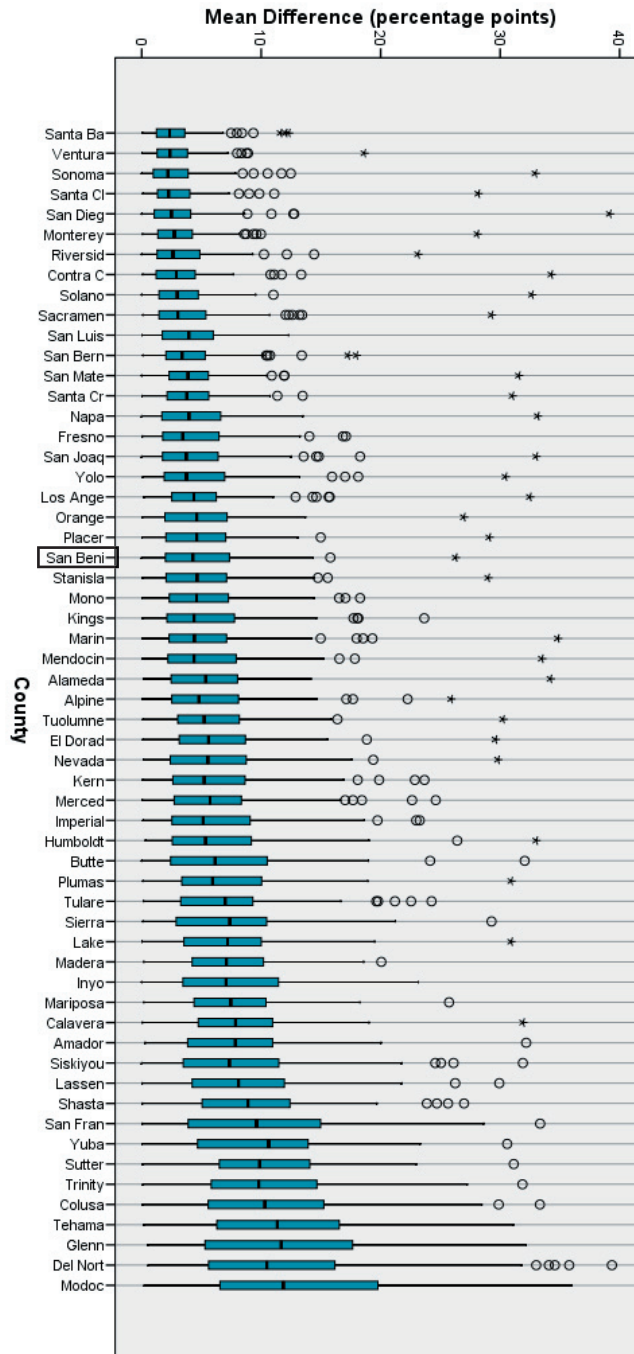


**Chart B. California Top of the Ticket Statewide Races 2000-2008**  
**Box Plots (n=11)**



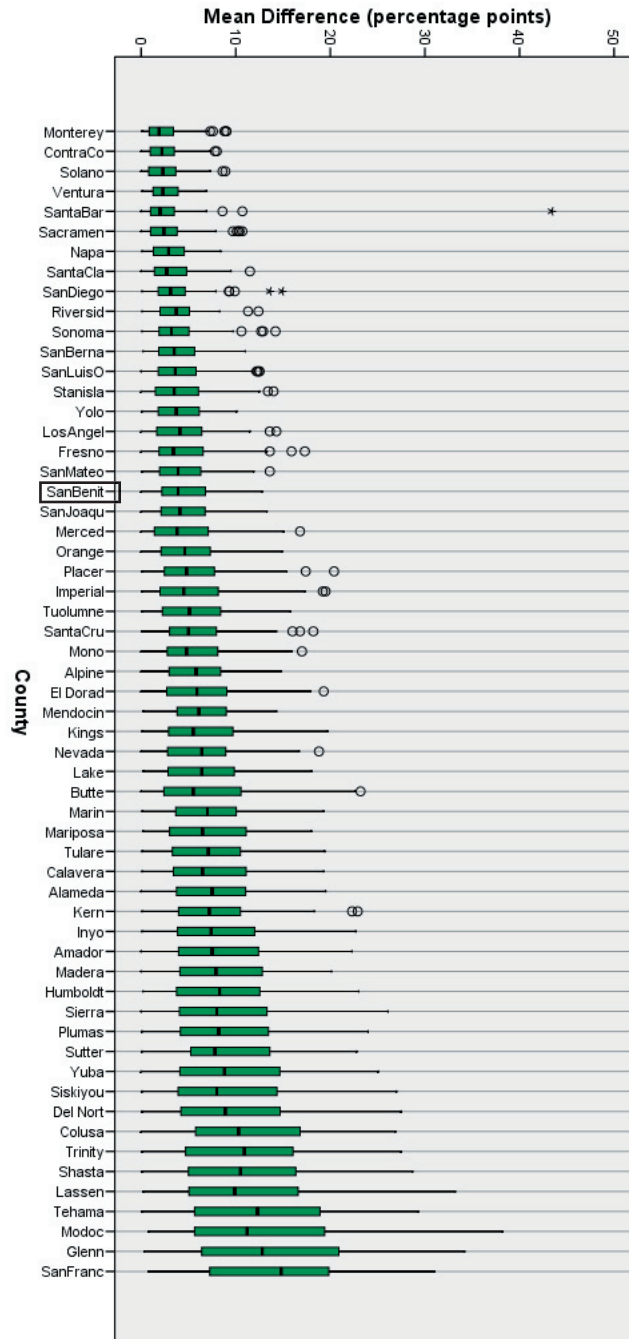
Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote* (2000-2008).

**Chart C. California Ballot Propositions 1980-1988**  
**Box Plots (n=139)**



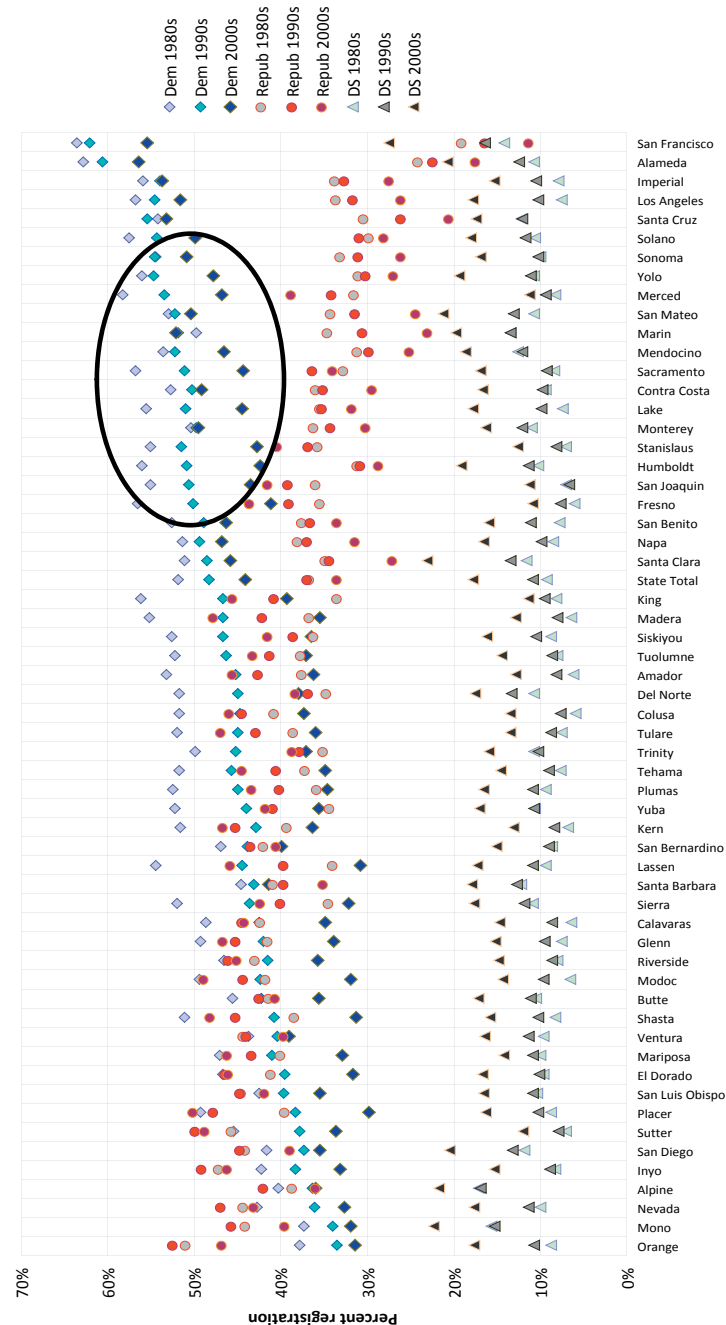
Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote* (1980-1988).

**Chart D. California Ballot Propositions 1990-1998**  
**Box Plots (n=139)**



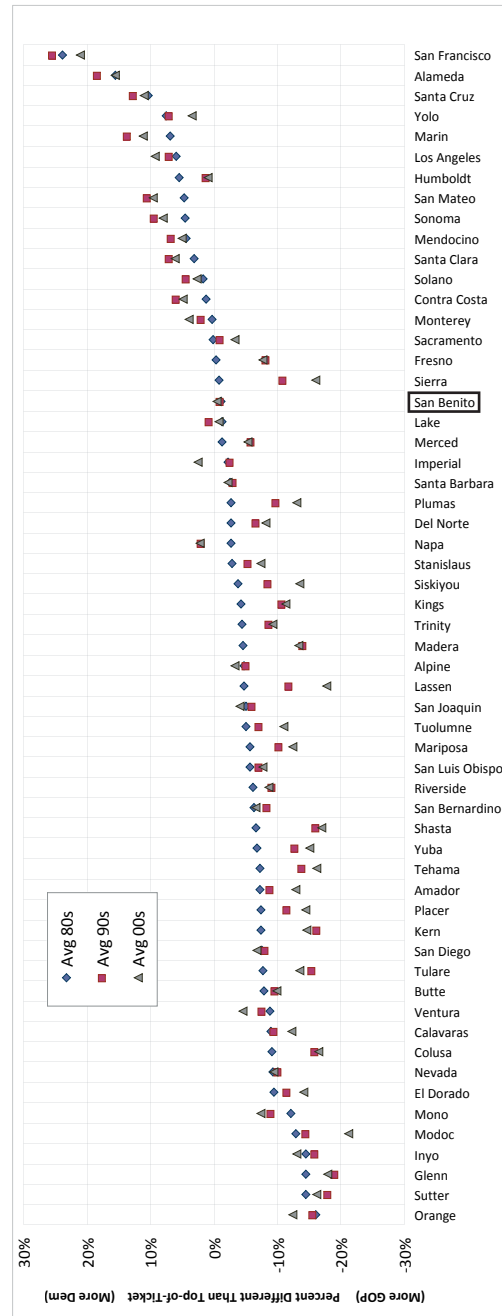
Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote* (1990-1988).

**Chart E. Partisan Registration by California County  
Average by Decade 1980-2009**



Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote* (1980-2009).

**Chart F. Voting Patterns in California Counties**  
**Difference from the State on Top-Ticket Races by Decade 1980-2009**



Source: California Secretary of State, Statement of the Vote (1980-2008).

Note: Calculated as the average difference between the county and the remainder of the state.

**Chart G. Voting Patterns in California Regions Difference from the State on Top-Ticket Races by Decade 1980-2009**



Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote* (1980-2008).



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