

THE FIELD POLL

THE INDEPENDENT AND NON-PARTISAN SURVEY
OF PUBLIC OPINION ESTABLISHED IN 1947 AS
THE CALIFORNIA POLL BY MERVIN FIELD

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BIG DECLINE IN SUPPORT FOR BUILDING MORE NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS, BUT MAJORITY SEES EXISTING PLANTS AS SAFE. PLURALITY OPPOSES PHASING THEM OUT. VOTERS SPLIT ON SAFETY OF OFFSHORE OIL DRILLING. OPPOSITION TO BUILDING MORE OFFSHORE WELLS.

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By Mark DiCamillo and Mervin Field

Over the past year there has been a marked decline in voters support for building more nuclear power plants in California. In a *Field Poll* survey completed last week, just 38% agreed and 58% disagreed more nuclear plants should be built in the state.

This represents a significant drop off in support for more nuclear power plants from last year, when a plurality (48%) supported building more such plants and 44% were opposed. The shift comes in the wake of the meltdown at the Japanese Fukushima nuclear power plants in March. It is similar to a big drop off in public support for nuclear power observed after the Three Mile Island nuclear power accident in Pennsylvania in 1979.

However, by a margin of 56% to 32%, most Californians believe that California's existing nuclear power plants are safe. When asked whether existing nuclear plants in the state should be phased out over a ten-year period, 46% are opposed, while 39% are in favor.

The poll also finds that, by a five to four margin (53% to 43%), voters oppose the idea of allowing oil companies to drill more oil and gas wells in state tidelands along the California seacoast.

Opinions are about evenly divided regarding whether current oil drilling along the coast is safe, although residents of coastal counties are less likely to view these operations as safe.

These are the findings from the latest *Field Poll* completed by telephone among a random sample of California voters June 3 – 13.

California public opinion about nuclear power has fluctuated widely

In California as elsewhere, nuclear power has become an accepted albeit potentially problematic source of generating electricity.

The Field Poll began measuring California voter sentiment on this issue thirty-six years ago and has periodically updated these measurements ever since.

The trend of voter attitudes on this issue has fluctuated widely during this period. In the mid-1970's support to allow more nuclear power plants to be built in the state exceeded two in three (69%). However, opinions swung against this view following the 1979 nuclear power accident at Three Mile Island, as support fell to just 37%. A majority remained opposed in the years before and immediately after another highly publicized nuclear accident in 1986 at Chernobyl in the Ukraine.

However, after the absence of any major state, national or international nuclear power incident in the decade of the 1990's, voters here become more supportive of building this type of power plant. For example, a 2001 *Field Poll* found 59% of this state's voters supporting the idea of building more such power plants in California.

Following the huge earthquake and tsunami that inflicted extensive damage to Japan's Fukushima nuclear power plant complex in March of this year, support for building more nuclear power plants has declined precipitously. At present, just 38% of Californians favor, while 58% oppose building additional nuclear plants here.

Large majorities of Democrats and non-partisans oppose building more nuclear power plants, while a majority of Republicans is supportive.

Voters in each of four major regions of the state now oppose building more nuclear power plants, with opposition greatest in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area.

Table 1
Trend of voter opinion about building more
nuclear power plants in California
(among registered voters)

"The building of more nuclear power plants should be allowed in California."	Agree	Disagree	No opinion
June 2011	38%	58	4
2010	48%	44	8
2008	50%	41	9
2001	59%	36	5
1990	38%	56	6
1984	33%	61	6
1981	40%	55	5
1980	41%	53	6
1979	37%	55	8
1978	51%	44	5
1977	63%	24	13
1976	69%	19	12
<u>Party registration</u>			
Democrats	29%	67	4
Republicans	55%	40	5
Non-partisans/others	32%	65	3
<u>Region (June 2011)</u>			
Los Angeles County	39%	58	3
Other Southern California	40%	55	5
San Francisco Bay Area	28%	66	6
Other Northern California	40%	57	3

Note: Surveys completed prior to 2001 conducted among all California adults.

Most voters feel California nuclear power plants are safe

Two major nuclear power plants currently operate in California. These include the Pacific Gas and Electric Company's Diablo Canyon nuclear power facility in San Luis Obispo County and the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station, jointly owned by Southern California Edison Company, San Diego Gas & Electric and the city of Riverside, in northern San Diego County.

Most Californians (56%) believe that these existing facilities are safe, while about one in three (32%) do not.

This overall five to three statewide ratio does not vary a great deal across the state's major regions, although voters in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area are somewhat less likely to feel that these types of power plants are safe.

Views about nuclear power safety divide along partisan lines. A plurality of Democratic voters (48%) believe they are safe, but 38% say they aren't. This contrasts with the opinions of Republicans who maintain that California's nuclear power plants are safe by a five to one margin – 76% to 15%.

Table 2			
Do you think the nuclear power plants currently operating in California are safe or not? (among California registered voters)			
	<u>Safe</u>	<u>Not safe</u>	<u>No opinion</u>
Total registered voters	56%	32	12
<u>Party registration</u>			
Democrats	48%	38	14
Republicans	76%	15	9
Non-partisans/others	46%	43	11
<u>Region</u>			
Los Angeles County	52%	40	8
Other Southern California	63%	28	9
San Francisco Bay Area	47%	36	17
Other Northern California	59%	26	15

Plurality opposes the idea of phasing out nuclear power operations in the state

A plurality of Californians (46%) opposes the idea of gradually phasing out nuclear power operations in the state, while 39% supports such a move.

There are partisan differences on this issue, with Democrats favoring the idea by a small margin and Republicans overwhelmingly opposed.

Pluralities of voters in each region oppose the idea of phasing out the state's nuclear power plants, with the exception of voters in the San Francisco Bay Area, where this idea is supported five to three (50% to 29%).

Table 3
**Would you favor or oppose phasing out California's
existing nuclear power plants by the year 2021
(among California registered voters)**

	<u>Favor</u>	<u>Oppose</u>	<u>No opinion</u>
Total registered voters	39%	46	15
<u>Party registration</u>			
Democrats	47%	42	11
Republicans	26%	60	14
Non-partisans/others	42%	37	21
<u>Region</u>			
Los Angeles County	43%	48	9
Other Southern California	31%	58	11
San Francisco Bay Area	50%	29	21
Other Northern California	37%	40	23

Opposition to building more oil and gas wells along the coast

Public opinion toward offshore oil drilling has also varied over the years. Between 1977 and 1981 pluralities or majorities of Californians favored allowing more offshore drilling. However, in Field Poll surveys conducted since then, opposition has exceeded support. The current poll finds 53% of voters against the idea of allowing more offshore oil and gas drilling and 43% in support.

An event bringing into focus the dangers of offshore oil and gas drilling occurred last year when an offshore oil rig blowout caused a major spill in the Gulf of Mexico. It took months before the spill was brought under control and not before widespread adverse economic and environmental consequences had occurred.

This issue also divides voters sharply by party. Democrats oppose allowing more offshore drilling two and one-half to one (67% to 27%). On the other hand, Republicans hold an entirely different view, with 65% in favor and 32% opposed.

Opposition to more drilling along the coast is greater among those voters living in coastal counties than among those living in inland areas. A majority (55%) of voters living in coastal counties currently oppose allowing more drilling offshore, while 39% are in favor. By contrast, a narrow plurality of inland county voters supports allowing more offshore oil drilling.

Table 4
Trend of voter opinion about drilling more oil and gas wells along the California seacoast (among registered voters)

"Oil companies should be allowed to drill more oil and gas wells in state tidelands along the California seacoast."	Agree	Disagree	No opinion
June 2011	43%	53	4
2010	31%	61	8
2008	43%	51	6
2005	39%	56	5
2001	38%	56	6
1990	32%	62	6
1984	43%	53	4
1981	49%	45	6
1980	56%	38	6
1979	57%	38	5
1978	51%	43	6
1977	49%	40	11
<u>Party registration</u>			
Democrats	27%	67	6
Republicans	65%	32	3
Non-partisans/others	41%	55	4
<u>Area</u>			
Coastal counties	39%	55	6
Inland counties	50%	47	3

Note: Surveys completed prior to 2001 conducted among all California adults.

Mixed views about whether offshore oil drilling is safe

Californians are about evenly divided on the question of whether current oil and gas drilling operations along the coast are safe. Forty-eight percent say they are safe and 46% think otherwise.

Sharp partisan differences also show up on this question. By a two-to-one margin, 62% to 31%, Democrats say the drilling is not safe. By contrast, an even larger majority of Republicans (75% to 18%) believe that offshore drilling operations are safe.

Voters residing in the coastal counties feel such operations are not safe, by a 50% to 45% margin. By contrast, a 56% to 37% majority of those living in the inland counties are of a mind that such drilling operations are safe.

Table 5
Do you think that offshore oil drilling along the California seacoast is safe or not?
(among California registered voters)

	<u>Safe</u>	<u>Not safe</u>	<u>No opinion</u>
Total registered voters	48%	46	6
<u>Party registration</u>			
Democrats	31%	62	7
Republicans	75%	18	7
Non-partisans/others	44%	52	4
<u>Area</u>			
Coastal counties	45%	50	5
Inland counties	56%	37	7

Information About The Survey

Methodological Details

The findings in this report are based on a *Field Poll* survey completed June 3-13, 2011 among a random sample of 950 registered voters in California. In order to cover a broad range of issues and minimize respondent fatigue, the questions in this release were asked of a random subsample of 472 registered voters.

Interviewing was conducted by telephone in English and Spanish using live interviewers working from Field Research Corporation's central location telephone interviewing facilities. Up to six attempts were made to reach, screen and interview each randomly selected voter on different days and times of day during the interviewing period.

Interviewing was completed on either a voter's landline phone or a cell phone depending on the source of the telephone listing from the voter file. After the completion of interviewing, the overall registered voter sample was weighted to *Field Poll* estimates of the characteristics of the registered voter population in California by region, age, gender and party registration.

Sampling error estimates applicable to the results of any probability-based survey depend on sample size as well as the percentage distribution being examined. The maximum sampling error estimates for results based on the random subsample of 472 voters have a sampling error of +/- 4.6 percentage points. The maximum sampling error is based on results in the middle of the sampling distribution (i.e., percentages at or near 50%). Percentages at either end of the distribution (those closer to 10% or 90%) have a smaller margin of error.

There are other potential sources of error in surveys besides sampling error. However, the overall design and execution of the survey sought to minimize these other possible sources of error.

The Field Poll was established in 1947 as *The California Poll* by Mervin Field, who is still an active advisor. The *Poll* has operated continuously since then as an independent, non-partisan survey of California public opinion. The poll receives annual funding from media subscribers of *The Field Poll*, from several California foundations, and from the University of California and California State University systems, who receive the raw data files from each *Field Poll* survey shortly after its completion for teaching and secondary research purposes.

Questions Asked

Do you agree or disagree with the following two statements... (ITEMS READ IN RANDOM ORDER) Do you agree or disagree?

The building of more nuclear power plants should be allowed in California

Oil companies should be allowed to drill more oil and gas wells in state tidelands along the California seacoast

Generally speaking, do you think that nuclear power plants currently operating in California are safe or not?

Some people believe that the existing nuclear power plants operating in California should be shut down over the next ten years or so. Would you favor or oppose California phasing out its existing nuclear power plants by the year 2021?

Generally speaking, do you think that offshore oil drilling along the California seacoast is safe or not?