

Pandemic and Party Beat Back Newsom Recall

Positive results on handling the pandemic, unfavorable views of the Republican Party and a turnout advantage among Democrats cemented Gov. Gavin Newsom's victory in California's recall election, according to exit poll results.

Some results were less incumbent-friendly: Six in 10 voters called the cost of living in their area "unmanageable," and the electorate divided evenly in rating the state's economy positively or negatively, 50-47 percent. But neither was enough to deny Newsom his win.

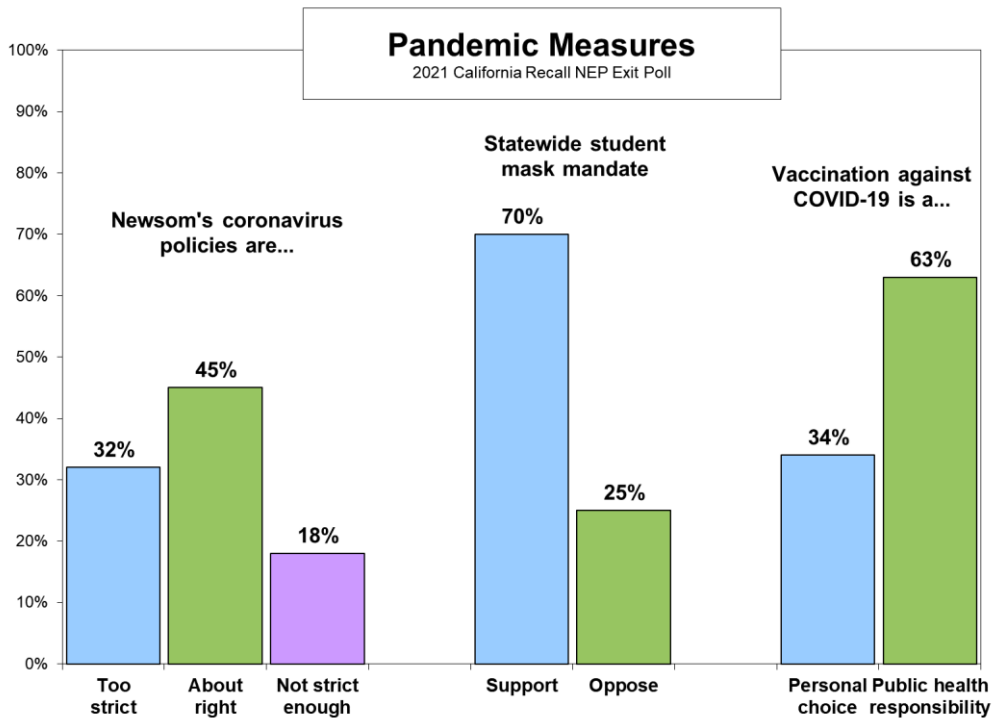
More voters called the pandemic the state's top issue, 31 percent, than picked any of four other issues offered in the exit poll – and 80 percent of those voters supported retaining Newsom in office. In sharp contrast, among voters focused on the economy, 68 percent voted to remove him, as did 89 percent of those who cited crime as the state's biggest problem.

Indeed, the election came as the CDC released positive data on the pandemic in California, reporting that it's lowest nationally in per-capita weekly COVID-19 cases, tied for the second-lowest death rate and the only state to have less than a high level of community transmission. Eighty-four percent of adults in the state have received at least one dose of a vaccine, ranking it in the top 10 states nationally.

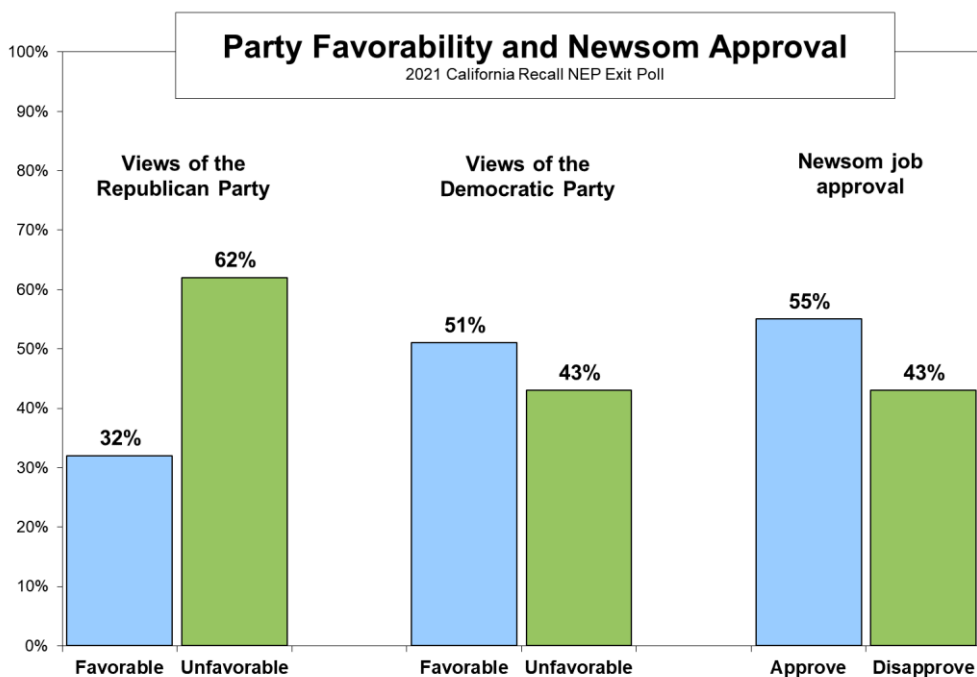
Overall, 55 percent in exit poll data, analyzed for ABC News by [Langer Research Associates](#), approved of the way Newsom is handling his job, 54 percent said he's in touch with their concerns and 55 percent said they'd be "concerned" or "scared" if he were removed.

Just three in 10 said Newsom's pandemic control measures are too strict, countering a key argument in the recall drive against him. A broad 70 percent supported the state's student mask mandate and 63 percent sided with the governor in seeing vaccination as more of a public health responsibility than a personal choice. Notably, just 24 percent said the pandemic is getting worse in the state; a plurality, 39 percent, said it's improving, with the rest saying it's staying the same.

Tellingly, among voters who called Newsom's pandemic policies too strict, 92 percent voted to recall him. But he won nearly as many, 86 percent, of those who called his measures about right – as well as 82 percent of those who said they weren't strict enough.



Underscoring the GOP's challenges in California, 62 percent rated the Republican Party unfavorably, compared with a tepid but still positive 51 percent favorable rating for the Democratic Party. More fundamentally, Democrats outnumbered Republicans by 17 percentage points, 43-26 percent (with the rest independents and others). That resembled the electorate in Newsom's 2018 election as governor, 46-23 percent, Democrat-Republican.



	2021	2018	2003
Democrats	43%	46%	39%
Republicans	26	23	38
Independents/other	31	31	23
D-R gap	+17 pts.	+23	+1

Newsom only managed an even split among independents; they voted 50-50 on the recall. But the wide turnout advantage of Democrats over Republicans tipped the scale.

It was far from a replay of the recall of Democratic Gov. Gray Davis in 2003. Then Democrats and Republicans were evenly divided, 39-38 percent. A vast 83 percent rated the state's economy negatively. And just 27 percent approved of Davis' work as governor, half of Newsom's approval now.

	2021	2003
<i>State's economy</i>		
Excellent/good	50%	16%
Not so good/poor	47	83%

For his part, Joe Biden – who campaigned with Newsom on Monday – had a 56 percent approval rating in these results. Biden won the state in 2020 with 63 percent support; in this election, 55 percent of voters said they voted for him a year ago, 32 percent for Donald Trump.

Just 34 percent expressed a favorable opinion of Newsom's leading challenger, Republican Larry Elder, while 50 percent saw him unfavorably. That made Elder less of a draw than Arnold Schwarzenegger, who held a 50-45 percent favorable-unfavorable rating when he unseated Davis 18 years ago.

Indeed, while Elder was bidding to become California's first Black governor, 81 percent of Black voters (a slim 7 percent of the electorate) cast their ballots to retain Newsom.

A far larger group in the state, Hispanic/Latino voters, made up a quarter of the turnout in these exit poll results. That compares with 31 percent in the 2020 presidential election, but surpasses this group's share of the electorate in previous midterms in data since 1994 and in the 2003 recall contest alike. Fifty-eight percent of Latinos voted to retain Newsom – including 62 percent of Latina women, declining to a closer 53-47 percent retain/remove vote among Latino men.

His weakest group was non-college educated white voters; per the exit poll, 57 percent in this group voted to recall him.

Regionally, the exit poll data indicated support for Newsom peaking in the Bay Area and Los Angeles County, together home to four in 10 voters, while voters in extensive inland California voted by a 10-point margin to remove him.

The recall election exit poll was conducted with a mix of telephone, email to web and text-based interviews with early and absentee voters and in-person interviews with Election Day voters at a sample of polling places.

ISSUES – As noted, 31 percent in exit poll data cited the pandemic as the most important issue among five offered, compared with homelessness, 22 percent; the economy, 17 percent; wildfires, 14 percent; and crime, 8 percent.

On an additional issue (not included in the top-issue list), 60 percent called climate change a very serious problem for the state and 19 percent call it somewhat serious. Just 17 percent didn't think it's serious.

VOTING – Eighty percent of voters cast their ballot in advance of the election day, mostly by mail rather than at a drop-off location. Majorities in these exit poll results report voting by mail across partisan lines – 85 percent of Democrats, 73 percent of independents and 61 percent of Republicans.

It follows that late campaigning can't have made much of a difference: Eighty-seven percent of voters say they made their choice more than two weeks ago; indeed, seven in 10 say they decided before August.

Analysis by Gary Langer, Sofi Sinozich and Steven Sparks