

# The Political Views of Young Californians

## Highlights

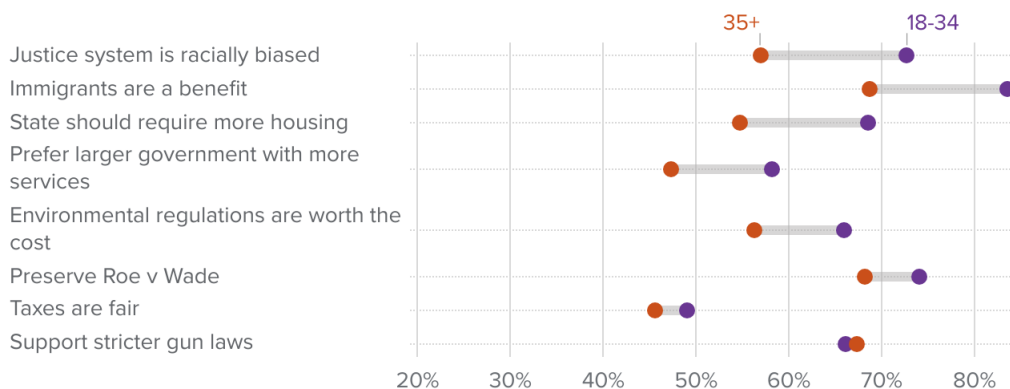
- ▶ Younger people in California are more liberal and Democratic—on policy issues and in terms of political ideology—than older Californians.
- ▶ The greater ethnic diversity of younger Californians does not wholly explain the different perspectives.
- ▶ While young Republicans are more conservative than young Democrats or independents, they are less conservative than older Republicans across a range of topics. The result is less polarization among younger Californians.
- ▶ The views of young Californians may not change much as they age: based on 20 years of PPIC Statewide Surveys, each generation has changed little as it has grown older.

## Who are young Californians and where do they stand on political issues?

The demographics of younger people (18–34) in California today are quite different from those of older people (35+). Younger Californians are less likely to be white (28% vs. 46%), much less likely to own a home (24% vs. 59%), and much more likely to have an annual income under \$60,000.

Views on policy issues also tend to differ starkly between younger and older residents. Younger Californians take a more traditionally liberal stance on supporting government intervention in the economy: they are more likely to prefer a larger, more activist government and favor policies that create more housing and protect the environment. Furthermore, they lean into the ideas that immigrants benefit the state, and that the justice system is racially biased. Though younger Californians are more diverse, age gaps around these views are not fully explained by those racial and ethnic differences.

### Young people lean liberal on many issues, especially on race relations and immigration



Source: PPIC Statewide Surveys, 2016–2023

Age gaps are explained in part by the views of younger Republicans. While partisans young and old are still far from agreeing on many policy issues, younger partisans are less divided than their older counterparts. Compared to older peers, younger Democrats and Republicans are 9 percentage points closer in their view of whether racial bias exists in the justice system and 11 points closer on whether the tax system is fair. Younger partisans are 12 points closer on how strict gun laws should be and 14 points closer on the value of immigrants. On matters of environmental regulation and state mandates for more housing, the gap is 16 points smaller among the young.

Outside California, views overall are more conservative but the gap between young people and older people is often larger, according to data from the [Cooperative Election Study \(CES\)](#). For example, the difference between younger and older adults is larger on stepping up EPA enforcement of environmental laws (4 points larger than in California), increasing spending on police (6 points larger), and preferring higher taxes over spending cuts (9 points larger).

Age differences are more comparable inside and outside California on party, ideology, approval of elected officials, and vote choice—with young people taking a more Democratic or liberal position in each case. However, both younger and older people outside California are more Republican and conservative than are their counterparts in California from the same age group.

## Do political views change as people get older?

The PPIC Statewide Survey has asked about the size of government, the value of environmental regulations, and whether immigrants are a benefit or a burden for over 20 years—three questions that can tap into broader views about current events. This makes it possible to track five generations of Californians—the Silent Generation (born 1928–1945), the Baby Boomers (1946–1964), Generation X (1965–1980), Millennials (1981–1996) and Generation Z (born since 1996)—to see how their views on issues may have shifted over time.

For Californians, views have not changed much as people have aged. Some generations have moved left while others have moved right, but no consistent pattern has emerged across generations or issues. If anything, Californians have taken somewhat more liberal views on issues, with voters drifting away from the Republican party over the past 20 years of Statewide Survey data.

For the nation as a whole, CES results tell a different story. Over time, partisan identification among all generations except Generation Z has become more favorable to the Republican party—significantly so in the case of the Silent Generation.

## What do the views of young Californians mean for the future of California politics?

Because younger Californians may have very different opinions from older residents, it is critical to encourage young voters to turn out for elections to ensure that all voices are heard. There is a long history of [young voters turning out at much lower rates](#) than older voters. While full participation is a worthwhile goal in its own right, the need for it becomes more acute the more the views of any low-turnout group diverge from the views of high-turnout groups.

All else being equal, the politics of California's future may be somewhat more liberal but also less polarized than today. The parties will have to adjust to this change by moving to meet the voters where they are. In some cases, they might communicate existing ideas in a way that speaks to the deeper origins of younger Californians' opinions.

---

Adapted by Stephanie Barton from [The Political Views of Young Californians](#) by Eric McGhee, Jennifer Paluch, and Dean Bonner.