

## **“A Deep Blue Hole”?: California, the Tea Party, and the 2010 Midterm Elections**

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### **Introduction**

One of the most discussed features of the 2010 election has been the impact of The Tea Party. At a time when the current president is thought by many voters to have pursued a “big government” philosophy and the state of California has one of the highest unemployment rates in a nation in the midst of the deepest recession since the Great Depression, the political environment of the state should be ripe for a movement such as the Tea Party, whose concerns are deficit reduction, reduction of wasteful spending, and shrinking the size of government, as opposed to social issues (M. Fiorina 2010). Additionally, California has a long history of anti-tax sentiment, epitomized by passage of Proposition 13 in 1978, and a growing distrust of elected officials and government (Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) 2002). In fact, just 18 percent of Californians say they can trust government to do what is right all or most of the time (The PEW Center on the States/PPIC 2010). The state is also facing a severe fiscal crisis, making a plurality of Californians want spending cuts and increased efficiency in government; in a poll taken prior to the 2010 midterm elections, 48 percent of likely voters supported lower taxes and fewer services (PPIC 2010a).

While all of the above factors should have made California hospitable to the Tea Party movement, Tea Party candidates, or the Republican Party generally in the 2010 midterm elections, nothing of the kind occurred. By all accounts, the Tea Party was almost a non-factor in California. Additionally, the Republican Party lost all statewide offices (most by very wide margins), gained no seats in the state legislature and, no seats in California’s delegation to the

House of Representatives. This chapter seeks to explain this outcome, which was unusual in the 2010 midterm elections when compared to election outcomes in other states.

Given the political predilections of most Californians, it seems possible that the Tea Party could have had an opening in California to attract voters or at least influence election outcomes in the state, particularly among Independent voters, or voters who decline to state a party affiliation on their voter registration form. This is particularly true because while registration trends among the electorate for the two major parties favor the Democratic Party, their numbers have declined over the last two decades and there has been an increase in the number of registered Independents (PPIC 2010b). Additionally, when asked about their ideology—liberal, middle-of-the-road, or conservative—40 percent of likely Californian voters in the 2010 midterm elections identified as conservative, 31 percent liberal, and 29 percent middle-of-the-road (PPIC 2010a). Dissecting these numbers further, more Republican likely voters consider themselves conservative now than they did in 2006 (78 percent compared to 65 percent, respectively), as do more Independents (31 percent compared to 26 percent, respectively). While the plurality of Independents still call themselves moderate (40 percent), and in general they continue to lean Democratic rather than Republican (38 percent compared to 30 percent), these numbers are not overwhelming (PPIC 2010a). This seems contradictory – there are more registered Democrats but more voters who identify as conservative – but in fact underscore James Stimson’s findings that many voters are symbolically “conservative” (i.e., say they are conservative) but operationally liberal (i.e., favor greater government spending on a variety of domestic programs) (2004, 87-95). Thus, voters who claim to be conservative could easily vote for Democratic candidates, which complicates the electoral landscape in California.

While Tea Party groups played a role in the Republican primary elections for U.S. Senator and Governor in the state (Michels 2010), their role in the U.S. senatorial and gubernatorial campaigns for the general election was relatively small. Ultimately, while candidates with a message of fiscal conservatism had an opportunity to be successful, they were not. This was largely due to demographic changes in the state and the fact that socioeconomic factors were strong predictors of voter behavior in the 2010 midterms and socioeconomic trends in the state favor the Democratic Party.

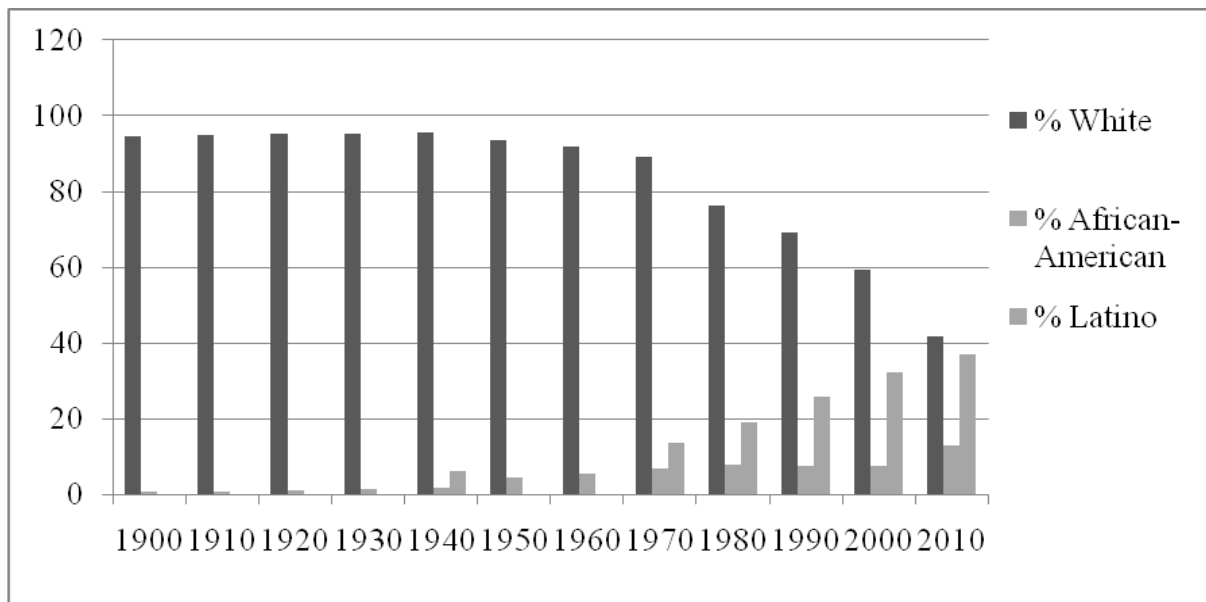
### **Section I: Political and Demographic Trends in California**

When analyzing the success of the Democratic Party in the 2010 midterm elections in California, it is important to understand how the demographic changes in the state over the last several decades coincide with the political realignment of the Democratic and Republican Parties. Over the past century, the Democrat Party has championed civil rights, the working class and working poor, environmental protection, and immigrants newly incorporated into the American polity, while the Republican Party has become a party committed to limited national government, personal freedom, lower taxes, and states' rights (Bartels 1998; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Gerring 1998; Karol 2009). As a result, citizens with concerns about equal rights, social justice, and environmental issues tend to affiliate and vote for the Democratic Party, often the more highly educated, women, and non-white voters (Greenberg 2004; Hopkins et al. 2008).

Demographic and political trends in California have changed substantially over in the post-World War II era, reflecting a shift towards populations more inclined to sympathize with the Democratic Party. The white population in California was as high as 95 percent in 1950, but has plummeted to just over 40 percent in 2010. While the current African-American population

in the state mirrors that of the nation, approximately 12 percent, the Latino population has soared from an estimated six percent in 1940 to 37 percent in 2010 (see Figure 1). California also has one of the more highly educated, wealthy, and liberal electorates in the country; almost 30 percent of the population has a bachelor’s degree or higher (compared to 27.5 percent nationally, in 2007), the median income in the state is \$61,000 (compared to \$52,000 nationally, in 2008), and the polls show Californians are strong supporters of government protection of minority rights, abortion rights, gun control, and environmental protections. Additionally, as California has a disproportionate share of minority groups, especially Latinos, and a more highly educated electorate, it has thus far been more resistant to anti-immigrant measures than most states with large immigrant populations.

**Figure 1: % White, African-American, and Latino Population in California, 1850 - 2010**



Examining voting patterns in light of this analysis reveals that voter behavior in California bears out a shift toward a more Democratic electorate. The statewide vote in

presidential elections is a good summary statement of the partisan orientation of a state. In every presidential election between 1984 and 2008, the Democratic presidential nominee received a greater percentage of the vote in California than in the nation as a whole. Additionally, the difference between the Democratic percentage of the presidential vote in California and in the nation has grown over this time period. Between 1984 and 1996, the Democratic presidential vote in California averaged approximately 2 percentage points greater than in the nation as a whole. By contrast, over the 2000 to 2008 period, the Democratic presidential vote in California averaged approximately 6.4 points greater than in the nation as a whole.

This increase in the Democratic percentage of the presidential vote coincided with the alignment of the Democratic Party on key issues that resonated with California voters: pro-choice on abortion, pro-gun control, and pro-environmental protection. As these positions tend to be supported by more highly educated voters, the increased share of the Democratic presidential vote in California should come from counties with higher levels of education; and, indeed, the increase in the Democratic percentage of the two-party vote for president from 1988 to 2008 correlates at .63 with the percentage of the county population 25, and older, who have at least a bachelor of arts degree. These numbers suggest that the shifting demographic and political trends in California also seem to be producing a stronger relationship between socioeconomic factors and Democratic voting.

Another important feature of the political environment in Californian is the ballot initiative. These initiatives frequently deal with policies that divide the Democratic and Republican parties, but it is difficult to use voting results on initiatives to discern the political predilection of the populace because attitudes on initiative issues are often shaped by factors other than political party identification, such as religious affiliation. They are useful, however,

for gaining a better understanding of the relationship between socioeconomic factors, particularly educational attainment, and voter behavior.

For example, one of the most important ballot initiatives of the 1960s was Proposition 14 in 1964. Passage of Proposition 14 overturned an open housing law that had been passed by the California legislature. The correlation between the vote in favor of Proposition 14 and county educational attainment was  $-.20$ . In 1994, California voters approved Proposition 187, which denied many public services to illegal immigrants. The countywide vote on Proposition 187 was strongly and negatively correlated with county educational attainment at  $-.80$ . Similarly, in 1996, passage of Proposition 209 prohibited the state of California from using affirmative action in the operation of public employment, education, or contracting. As with Proposition 187, the correlation between the vote in favor of Proposition 209 and county educational attainment was strongly and negatively correlated at  $-.67$ . Finally, in 2008, voter approved Proposition 8, which outlawed same-sex marriage in the state. Again, the countywide vote was strongly and negatively associated with county educational attainment,  $-.85$ . While in each of these instances the more socially tolerant position was defeated, the association between education and “tolerant voting,” or voting “no” on these propositions, was strong and grew stronger in the 1990-2010 period.

Environmental policy has also become an important part of California politics. Two initiatives with important environmental ramifications for the state were Proposition 128 (frequently referred to as “Big Green”) in 1990 and Proposition 23 in 2010. Proposition 128, which failed to pass, sought to limit greenhouse gas emissions, off-shore oil drilling in the state, and ban the sale of 32 different pesticides linked to cancer or birth defects (Miller 1990). Proposition 23, which also did not pass, would have suspended California’s landmark law to

reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The countywide vote in favor of the “pro-environmental” position on both initiatives (yes on 128 and no on 23) was very strongly correlated to countywide educational attainment: Proposition 128 at .85 and Proposition 23 at -.81.

Finally, since tax burden and economic considerations have long been important in California politics, it is appropriate to examine voting on financial initiatives. One of the most important ballot initiatives in California’s fiscal history was Proposition 13, which passed in 1978 and greatly reduced property tax revenue for state and local governments, limited future property tax increases, and required any legislatively enacted tax increase to gain two-thirds of the vote in both houses of the California legislature. Many analysts argue that much of California’s current budget difficulties can be traced to Proposition 13. The countywide vote on Proposition 13 is correlated with educational attainment at -.23. In 2010, the correlation between the countywide vote on Proposition 25, which reduced the legislative vote necessary to pass a state budget from two-thirds to a simple majority, and educational attainment was .72. A similar relationship emerges when we examine the 2010 countywide vote for Proposition 26, which increased the legislative vote necessary to increase many fees from a simple majority to two-thirds, and educational attainment. These factors correlate with each other strongly, and negatively, at -.79.

All of this is to suggest that California has changed in important and significant ways over the last several decades, and this demographic and ideological change has occurred as the two political parties in American politics have realigned and solidified around certain social groups and issues. The state of California is now a majority-minority state, with key segments of the population supporting government protection of minority rights and immigrant-friendly immigration policies. The state is also highly educated and wealthier, with residents expressing

commitment to abortion rights, gun control, and environmental regulation. These demographic and ideological shifts have made California “a deep blue hole” for the Republican Party (Decker 2010). Importantly, however, fiscal policy remains the one policy arena in which a conservative candidate or a conservative movement could gain a foothold in the state. Indeed, targeting the fiscal crisis of the state was a key strategy of Republicans running in the 2010. Yet, even in this arena, even in an election year primed for Republican victory, Republicans could not win in the state of California. The remainder of this chapter will examine the 2010 primary and general elections to determine why Republicans were not successful, and what, if any, affect the Tea Party movement, so successful in other states, had in the state of California.

### **Section III: the 2010 Midterm Elections**

The Democratic primary races were largely uneventful; Barbara Boxer, a three-term Senator running for her fourth term won handily, with 81 percent of the vote, while Edmund G. “Jerry” Brown won the Democratic primary for governor with 84.4 percent of the vote. Brown was able to win by such a large margin because he faced relatively weak opponents; the biggest obstacle to a Brown victory would have been a run for governor by San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, who ran for Lieutenant Governor and won, or Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, both of whom opted not to run against the former Governor and long-time California politician (Decker 2010b). Meg Whitman, in her bid for the Republican nomination for Governor, was not as lucky.

Whitman’s main opponent in the June primary was Steve Poizner who in the end only received 26.7 percent of the vote, but served to push Whitman to stake a more conservative position on several issues than she had originally intended. Indeed, while Whitman’s campaign



understood that to win the primary she would need to cater to a more conservative Republican primary electorate, they were also aware that winning the general election would require her to be more moderate on several key issues, including immigration and abortion. Thus, at the start of her campaign Whitman, drawing her on professional experience as CEO of eBay, portrayed herself as a moderate, pragmatic candidate who would go to Sacramento to focus on jobs, controlling government spending, and education (Decker 2010b). Indeed, “The state’s political gurus...held that Poizner, with his sharp move to the right on a host of issues, had little chance of winning in November. Whitman, the storyline went, could cobble together a coalition of voters: conservatives and moderates, Republicans and nonpartisans and a smattering of Democrats, more women and more Latinos than side with the typical Republican candidate” (Decker 2010b). In her article, Decker also notes that this coalition of voters propelled Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and former Governor Pete Wilson to victory.

Yet Poizner’s more conservative positions and his repeated attacks that Whitman was not conservative enough on key issues forced Whitman to tack right in the days leading up to the primary election. She also sought and secured the endorsements of former Governor Pete Wilson, former Vice-President Dick Cheney, and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, all of whom appeared in television ads on Whitman’s behalf (Decker 2010b). This allowed Whitman to gain a lead in the polls over Poizner, but sacrifice a lead over Brown in a hypothetical match-up for the general election. Her response to Poizner worked to secure her nomination among the Republican Party base, but ultimately undid her chances of cobbling together a winning coalition for success in the general election – Whitman simply could not “figure out a way to scramble back to the political center” in order to win the Independent voters or enough Democrats to put her over the top in November (quoted in Decker 2010b). It is

important to note that unlike the GOP candidate for the U.S. Senate, Carly Fiorina, Whitman did not actively seek the support of the Tea Party movement or Sarah Palin, the former Governor of Alaska.

Rather, it appears that the Whitman campaign tried to walk a line between running on solid conservative credentials and pragmatic, business experience that would allow her to work across the aisle to solve California's problems. Despite taking a liberal position on abortion (Whitman is pro-choice), she was unable to make sufficient inroads in more well-educated Democratic constituencies. County educational attainment was strongly positively correlated with the countywide vote for Brown at .68.

The Tea Party and Sarah Palin did not have a direct effect on the outcome of the GOP gubernatorial primary or general election results, but did play a significant role in the race for U.S. Senate in California. Carly Fiorina, widely seen as the favorite candidate among GOP leaders, faced a tougher than expected primary challenge from Tom Campbell and Chuck DeVore. If Fiorina was to win the primary, she would need to prove her conservative *bona fides*. Unlike Whitman, Fiorina never attempted to stake out moderate positions on hot-button issues. Her campaign strategy was to establish herself as a solid conservative, and use that to clearly distinguish herself from Boxer. Therefore, rather than trying to build a coalition of voters that could defeat Boxer, Fiorina sought to tap and energize those who identified as conservatives in California. Given that more California voters identify as conservative (40 percent) and middle-of-the-road (31 percent), her strategy seemed reasonable. Fiorina actively campaigned at Tea Party events (Reston and Mehta 2010), and sought Palin's endorsement to help boost her reputation among initially skeptical conservatives. In her endorsement of Fiorina one month before the primaries, Palin said that Fiorina was a "common sense conservative" who is "pro-

life, pro-traditional marriage, pro-military and pro-strict border security” (quoted in Mehta and Reston 2010). Palin’s endorsement is widely regarded as having helped secure the GOP primary election for Fiorina, and following the endorsement Fiorina’s campaign sent mailers highlighting Palin’s support (Mehta and Reston 2010). However, the campaign seems to have underestimated the affect of Palin’s unfavorable ratings among Californians on Fiorina’s general election viability.

In a Field Poll conducted September 14 – 21, 2010, 53 percent of all voters in California viewed Palin unfavorably, with 79 percent of Democrats saying they viewed her unfavorably and 69 percent of Independents saying they viewed her unfavorably. Republicans, however, regarded Palin very highly, with a 74 percent favorable rating. Moreover, pluralities of Republican supporters for GOP candidates said that a Palin endorsement would affect them positively, compared to supporters of Brown and Boxer who said a Palin endorsement would have a strongly negative effect (Field Research Corporation 2010). Boxer capitalized on this by running television ads labeling Fiorina as “too extreme” for California (Mehta and Reston 2010).

Several key issues shaped the race for U.S. Senate in California. Environmental concerns about off-shore drilling rose in the wake of the BP oil spill that occurred in April 2010. In response, Fiorina did not change her position on extending off-shore oil drilling off California’s coast, despite that other Republicans were changing their tone about drilling in California, including Whitman (Reston and Mehta 2010). Fiorina also took a hard-line position on Proposition 23, an initiative on the November ballot that would have suspended state greenhouse gas emission laws until unemployment in California dropped below 5.5 percent. In comparison, Whitman took a more moderate position on Proposition 23, saying that the emission reduction requirements should only be suspended for one year, rather than pegging suspension to the

state's unemployment rate. Given the known importance of environmental issues to California voters, in particular those with higher levels of education, and their general willingness to regulate industry in this policy arena, Fiorina's positions on these two issues were far more conservative than the general electorate. She also staked more conservative positions on abortion and immigration than the general electorate, and when compared to her Republican counterpart in the gubernatorial race. Fiorina said that she would support the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, despite that seven in 10 Californians support abortion rights, and Fiorina supported Arizona's controversial immigration law (Reston and Mehta 2010). Ultimately, these positions contributed to her loss in the general elections.

Finally, the election for U.S. Senate in California provides a good example of how socioeconomic factors shape electoral outcomes. As with the presidential vote in 2008 and the gubernatorial vote in 2010, county educational attainment was strongly and positively related to the percentage of the general election vote for Boxer, the Democratic candidates, at .72. A similar pattern emerged in the Republican primary for the U.S. Senate. Tom Campbell was pro-choice on abortion and was more accommodationist toward illegal immigrants than Carly Fiorina. The countywide vote for Campbell correlated with countywide educational attainment at .62.

We can get a better appreciation for the relationship between socioeconomic factors and the Democratic victories in the California midterm election by examining the relationship between key socioeconomic variables and the percentage of the vote the Democratic candidates received in each county in California the general election of 2010. Table 1 shows the results of three different models assessing the relationship between socioeconomic variables known to shape voter behavior and the vote percentage received in each county by Boxer and Brown (the

dependent variables). In each model, the independent variables are: the percentage of county population, 25 years and older, who held a bachelors degree or higher in 2000; median income in the county, in 2005; the percentage of the county population that was white, in 2005; the percentage of the county population that was 65 and older, in 2005; and, to control for the effect of the state of the economy, the unemployment rate in the county in 2009. To assess how the magnitude of each effect might have changed over time, the third model estimates the effects of these independent variables on Boxer's vote percentage in each county in 2004 (the dependent variable); in this last model, all independent variables remain the same except the unemployment rate, which captures the county unemployment rate in 2006, the closest date to the election for which we have county-level unemployment data.

As Table 1 shows, the only significant factors affecting the 2010 vote for both Boxer and Brown are educational attainment – the more highly educated a county's population the higher the vote percentage for the Democratic candidates – and the percentage of the white population in the county – the higher the percentage of white residents the lower the vote percentage for the Democratic candidates. These findings support the claims made throughout this chapter, that as California has become more diverse, more educated, and more liberal on social issues, the voters have become more Democratic. It is also interesting to compare the findings from the first model, examining Boxer's vote percentage in 2010, to the third model, examining her vote percentage in 2004. This third model provides further evidence that the magnitude of the effect of educational attainment on the Democratic vote percentage has grown over time; in 2004 a one point increase in the population, 25 and older, holding a bachelors degree or higher, produced a .74 point increase in the percentage of the vote received by Boxer. In 2010, a one point increase in the population, 25 and older, holding a bachelors degree or higher, produced a .96 point

increase in the percentage of the vote received by Boxer. This provides further evidence of increasing strength over time of the relationship between educational attainment and Democratic vote percentage and liberal positions on voter initiatives presented earlier in the chapter.

**Table 1: Model of County Vote Percentage for Boxer and Brown in the California Midterm Elections, November 2, 2010 & Boxer 2004**

Variable		Boxer, 2010	Brown, 2010	Boxer, 2004
% 25+ w/Bachelor Degree or Higher, 2000	$\beta$	.956***	.937***	.740***
	S.E. $\beta$	.237	.214	.200
	P> t	.000	.000	.000
County Media Income (000s), 2005 dollars		-.245	-.327	-.062
		.157	.142	.156
		.124	.057	.687
% County Population that is White, 2005		-.254**	-.310**	-.286**
		.145	.131	.131
		.012	.004	.007
% County Population that is 65+, 2005		-.164	-.166	-.130
		.406	.367	.379
		.081	.098	.195
County Unemployment Rate, 2009		.186	.175	.141
		.455	.411	.653
		.097	.142	.252
Constant		58.4**	71.1***	65.8***
		18.2	16.5	15.5
		.002	.000	.000
Adjusted R-Squared		.65	.60	.61
N		58	58	58

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed test)

Ultimately, then, 2010 midterm election results in California were shaped by the candidates' electoral strategies, key social issues, and socioeconomic factors shaping voter

behavior. Moreover, while it is important to note the effect that the Tea Party had on the GOP primary race for U.S. Senate in California, a more important factor to consider is the changing demographic and ideological characteristics of the state, and how these attributes map onto broader changes in each of the two major political parties

#### **Section IV: Conclusion**

These results from both partisan voting and ballot initiatives show that broad political trends in the U.S. and in the state of California have aligned to create Democratic Party dominance in the state and that there is an increasing relationship between socioeconomic factors, specifically education, and political behavior in California elections. This raises important issues for the Democratic Party, however. First, the Democratic Party has greatly strengthened its position in California because of the strong support it receives from minority groups, especially Latinos and African-Americans, and the greater success it is having with more highly educated. The only apparent “threat” to the dominance of this coalition would be if Latinos and African-Americans, who tend to be less tolerant of divergent lifestyles (e.g., gay rights and abortion), start to vote Republican in significant numbers. Though, to speculate, the combination of lower than average income, which increases the dependence on governmental programs, and the Republican’s anti-immigrant stance, is likely to keep minority groups (especially Latinos) voting Democratic.

The Democratic Party’s recent success with more well-educated and upper income voters, while helpful electorally, may also reduce the redistributive power of the Democratic Party. As income and wealth inequality has grown over the last several decades, the wealthy are more likely to provide a greater percentage of the campaign dollars (Bartels 2008; Verba et al.

1995). To the extent that the donor base of the Democratic Party of California becomes wealthier, the Democratic Party may be unable to raise the necessary taxes from these high income voters in order to have both a progressive state revenue system and pay for state programs traditional identified with the Democratic Party (e.g., education and social welfare). These are important questions and issues facing the Democratic Party, and ones that they will have to address if they hope to maintain and expand their electoral power in the state. However, for now, the state of California seems that it will be reliably Democratic in the near future, and that the potential exists – because of demographic, ideological, and socioeconomic trends – for the Democrats to gain a strong foothold in the state for years to come.



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