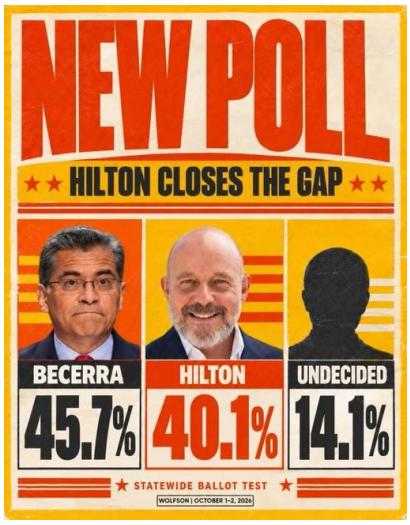


Hilton suddenly makes California worth watching

Republican Steve Hilton appears to be gaining ground on Democrat Xavier Becerra in California's governor's race, with a new internal poll showing the contest tightening considerably following the candidates' first debate.

The survey, commissioned by Hilton's campaign, found Becerra leading Hilton 45.7 percent to 40.1 percent, putting the Democrat ahead by just 5.6 percentage points. Another 14.1 percent of voters remain undecided, leaving a sizable bloc still up for grabs with Election Day approaching.

The numbers represent a sharp improvement for Hilton compared with another campaign-commissioned survey released last month. That poll showed Becerra comfortably ahead, 52 percent to 37 percent.

Between the two surveys, Becerra's support dropped 6.3 points while Hilton gained 3.1 points, suggesting the Republican may be making headway in a state where Democrats have long enjoyed a major statewide advantage.

There is still a significant warning sign for Hilton in the latest numbers. When undecided voters were pressed to choose between the two candidates, 72.5 percent broke for Becerra compared with 27.5 percent for Hilton.

The survey was conducted by pollster David Wolfson from Oct. 1 through Oct. 2 among 1,020 California voters.

Hilton has centered much of his campaign on California's cost of living, housing problems and broader dissatisfaction with the state's Democrat leadership, arguing that policies embraced by Becerra and his political allies have "destroyed the California Dream."

Becerra, meanwhile, has sought to pin at least part of California's affordability problems on President Trump.

“The cost of living was already big. Donald Trump just made it worse,” Becerra told CNN last week.

The two candidates also clashed sharply over immigration during their debate, with Becerra attempting to make the issue personal by contrasting his Mexican heritage with Hilton’s European background.

“You seem to welcome immigrants who look like you, but deport immigrants who look like me,” Becerra said.

Hilton fired back by pointing to his own immigrant background.

“Unlike Xavier Becerra, I am an immigrant,” Hilton said over the weekend. “Unlike Xavier Becerra, my father was an immigrant. My stepfather too. My whole family.”

Hilton argued that the broader issue is not ethnicity but the direction of the state.

“Unlike Becerra, because I’ve been out there listening to the people, I know Becerra’s policies have destroyed the California Dream,” Hilton said. “My plans will restore it.”

He later went even harder at his opponent, accusing Becerra of offering voters “NOTHING” and calling him a “smug, arrogant, machine politician mediocrity” who is taking Californians for granted.

The new internal poll is considerably more favorable to Hilton than the broader public polling picture.

The current RealClearPolling average, which does not appear to include the latest Hilton campaign survey, shows Becerra ahead by an average of 21.8 points based on polling from the Los Angeles Times/Berkeley IGS, KGTV-TV/SurveyUSA, Politico/Citrin and PPIC.

That leaves Hilton with substantial ground to make up in the public polling, but his campaign’s latest numbers offer Republicans at least one sign that the race may be getting more competitive as voters begin paying closer attention.