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CRITICAL JUNCTURES

California's Political History in Brief

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EARLY CALIFORNIA

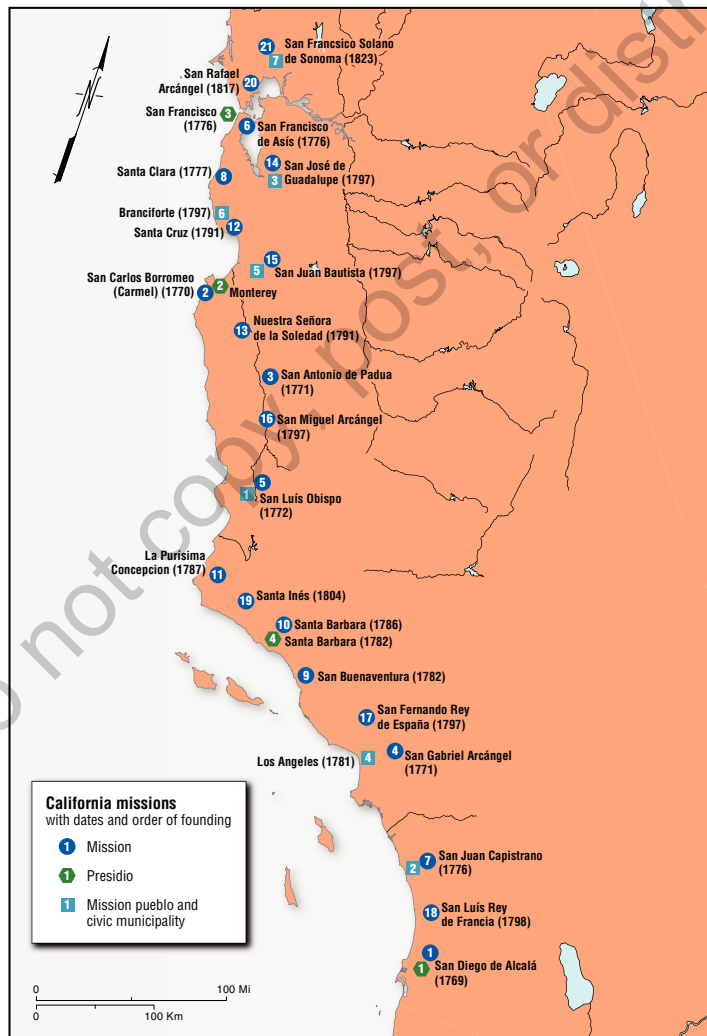
The contours of California's contemporary political landscape began to take shape in 1542, when Spanish explorer Juan Cabrillo claimed the Native American lands now known as San Diego for a distant monarchy, thereby paving the way for European settlements along the West Coast. Assisted by Spanish troops, colonization followed the founding of Catholic missions throughout Latin America and spread to Alta (then "northern") California with Mission San Diego de Alcalá in 1769. These missions, as well as fortified military presidios (army posts), were constructed along what became known as El Camino Real, or the King's Highway, a path that roughly followed a line of major tribal establishments. Native peoples were systematically subordinated and decimated by foreign diseases, soldiers, and ways of life that were unnatural to them, and the huge mission complexes and ranches, or rancheros, that transformed their lands became the focal points for food production, social activity, and economic industry in the region.

The western realm containing California became part of Mexico when that country gained independence from Spain in 1821, and for the next 25 years, Mexicans governed the region,

constructing presidios and installing military leaders to protect the towns taking shape up and down the coast. In 1846, a rebellious band of American settlers, declaring California a republic, raised the hastily patched Grizzly Bear Flag at Sonoma. Within weeks, the U.S. Navy lay claim to California, and for the next two years, an uncomfortable mix of American military rule and locally elected “alcaldes” (mayors who acted both as lawmakers and judges) prevailed.

Following the Mexican-American War of 1848 that ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, California became the new U.S. frontier astride a new international border. The simultaneous discovery of gold near Sacramento provoked an onslaught of settlers in what would be the first of several significant population waves to flood the West Coast during the next 125 years. The rush to the Golden State was on.

MAP 2.1 ■ California's Missions



THE RISE OF THE SOUTHERN PACIFIC RAILROAD

The tumult that lawless gold-seekers stirred up convinced many that civil government was needed. Spurning slavery and embracing self-governance, a group of mostly pre-gold-rush settlers and Mexican-American War veterans convened to write a state constitution in 1849 (replaced by a major revision in 1879); a year later, the U.S. Congress granted statehood, bypassing the usual compulsory territorial stage, and shortly thereafter Sacramento became the state's permanent capital. Although gold had already lured nearly 100,000 adventurers to the state in less than two years, the region was considered a mostly untamed and distant outpost, separated from the East Coast by treacherous terrain and thousands of miles of ocean travel. Growing demand for more reliable linkages to the rest of the country led to the building of the trans-continental railroad in 1869, an undertaking that resulted in the recruitment of thousands of Chinese laborers and millions of acres of federal land grants to a few railroad companies. Eleven million acres in California were granted to the Southern Pacific Railroad alone.¹

The wildly successful rail enterprise not only opened the West to rapid development near the turn of the century but also consolidated economic and political power in the Central Pacific Railroad, later renamed the Southern Pacific Railroad. Owned by barons Collis Huntington, Mark Hopkins, Leland Stanford, and Charles Crocker—the **Big Four**—the Southern Pacific extended its reach to virtually all forms of shipping and transportation. Their monopoly had direct impacts on all major commercial activity within the state, from wheat prices to land



Enduring persistent racial discrimination, punishing conditions, and a lack of labor and safety protections, Chinese immigrants laid thousands of miles of railroad tracks during the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Source: © Everett Collection Historical/Alamy.

values and from bank lending to the availability of lumber. The railroad tycoons' landholdings enabled them to control the prosperity or demise of entire towns that depended on rail stops throughout the West. Power didn't come cheap, however, and they fostered "friendships" in the White House, Congress, courts, and local and state governments by finding every influential person's "price." As famously depicted in the (1882) editorial cartoon, "The Curse of California," the "S.P." (Southern Pacific Railroad) dominated every major sector of the state's economy—and politics—like a relentless octopus.

PROGRESSIVISM

The Southern Pacific's hold over California government during the late 1800s cannot be overestimated. According to one historian, a generation of Californians believed that the influence of the railroad extended from the governor's mansion in Sacramento to their own town halls, and that the political machine determined "who should sit in city councils and on boards of supervisors; who should be sent to the House of Representatives and to the Senate in Washington; what laws should be enacted by the legislature, and what decisions should be rendered from the bench."²

The Southern Pacific's grip over California industry and politics was smashed, bit by bit, by muckraking journalists whose stories were pivotal in the creation of federal regulations aimed at breaking monopolies; by the prosecution of San Francisco's corrupt political boss, Abe Ruef; and by the rise of a national movement called "**Progressivism**." Governor Hiram Johnson (1911–17) personified the idealistic Progressive spirit through his efforts to eliminate every private interest from government and restore power to the people.

Governor Johnson spearheaded an ambitious reform agenda that addressed a wide range of social, political, and economic issues targeted by Progressives in other U.S. states. His agenda was not only grounded in a fundamental distrust of political parties, which had been hijacked by the Southern Pacific in California, but also built on an emerging philosophy that government could be run efficiently, like a business. Workers' rights, municipal ownership of utility companies, conservation, morals laws, and the assurance of fair political representation topped the list of items Hiram Johnson tackled with the help of the California legislature after he entered office in 1911.

New laws directly targeted the ties political parties had to both the railroads and potential voters. Although *secret voting* had become state law in 1896, the practice was reinforced as a means to protect elections and ensure fairness. The ability of political party bosses to "select and elect" candidates for political offices was undercut with *direct primary elections*, whereby any party member could become a candidate without obtaining permission from any higher-ups, and regular party members could choose their nominees freely. The legislature also reclassified local elected offices as "**nonpartisan**," meaning that the political party labels of candidates did not appear on the ballot if they were running for municipal offices, including city councils, local school boards, and judgeships. Efficiency, the Progressives believed, demanded that voters and officials be blind to partisanship, because petty divisions wasted valuable time and resources. They felt the important concern was the *best person* for the position, not the candidate's political party identification; after all, they argued, there was no partisan way to pave a street. This principle extended to government employees, who would now be part of a **civil service** system

based on merit (*what* one knew about a position and *how well* one knew it), rather than the former system based on **patronage** (*who* one knew and party loyalty). All of these practices continue today.

A more ingenious method of limiting political party power was accomplished through **cross-filing**, which meant that candidates' names could appear on *any* party's primary election ballot without their party label indicated. In effect, Republicans could be listed on Democrats' ballots and vice versa, thereby allowing candidates to become the official nominees for more than one party. This rule, which remained on the books until 1959, initially helped Progressives but later allowed Republicans to dominate the legislature despite a Democratic Party majority of voters after 1934.

Progressives transformed the relationship between citizens and government. They accomplished this first by *guaranteeing women the right to vote* in 1911 and then by adopting the tools of *direct democracy*: the *recall*, the *referendum*, and the *initiative* process (discussed in Chapter 3), arguably the most significant of all their reforms. By vesting the people with the power to change the constitution or make laws directly—even new laws that could override those already in place—Progressives redistributed political power and essentially redesigned the basic structure of government. No longer was California a purely representative democracy; it now had a *hybrid government* that combined direct and representative forms of democracy. Elected officials would now compete with the people and special interests to make law. The Progressives had triggered the state's first giant political earthquake.

It should be noted that the Progressives' efforts to widen access to political power did not extend to everyone, and some of the laws they passed were specifically designed to exclude certain groups from popular decision-making and civic life. Some of the most egregious examples reflected the White majority's racial hostility toward Chinese- and other Asian-born residents and descendants, which took the form of "Alien Land Laws" denying landownership, the right to self-defense in court, and other basic civil rights to anyone of Asian descent—laws that would not be removed from the state's books for another half century.

THE POWER OF ORGANIZED INTERESTS

Ironically, the Progressives' attacks on political parties and the Southern Pacific created new opportunities for other kinds of special interests to influence state government. Cross-filing produced lawmakers with weak party allegiances, and by the 1940s, they depended heavily on lobbyists for policy-relevant information as well as "amusements" to supplement their meager \$3,000 annual salary. The legendary Artie Samish, head of the liquor and racetrack lobbies from the 1920s to the 1950s, personified the power of the "third house" (organized interests represented in the lobbying corps) in his ability to control election outcomes and tax rates for industries he represented. "I am the governor of the legislature," he brazenly boasted to a journalist in the 1940s. "To hell with the governor of California."³ He was convicted and jailed for corruption not long after making this statement, but his personal downfall hardly disturbed the thriving, cozy relationships between lobbyists and legislators that continued to taint California state politics (Figure 2.1).

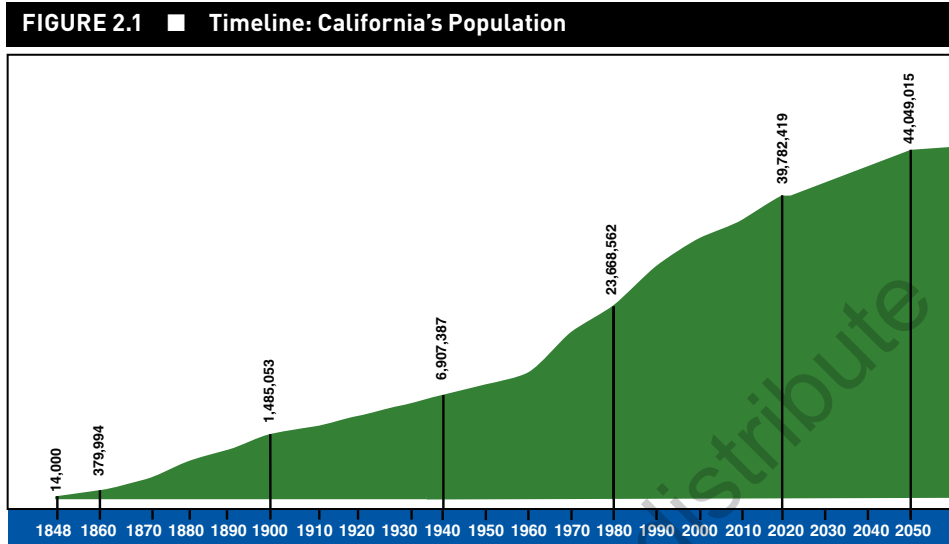


The Curse of California

Source: George Frederick Keller/Public domain/Wikimedia Commons.

GROWTH AND INDUSTRIALIZATION IN THE GOLDEN STATE

To outsiders, the image of California as a land of undiscovered riches and mythical possibility persisted even as the Great Depression took hold in the 1930s. As depicted in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, hundreds of thousands of unskilled American migrants from the mid- and south-western Dust Bowl ("Okies" and "Arkies," as they were pejoratively called by Californians) flooded the state, provoking a stinging social backlash that lasted at least until war production created new labor demands. The Depression also helped breathe life into the socialist political movement of Upton Sinclair, an outspoken, unconventional writer who easily won the 1934 Democratic nomination for governor by waging an "End Poverty in California" (EPIC) campaign, which promised relief for lower- and middle-class Californians through



Sources: Population estimates 1848–50 from Andrew Rolle, *California: A History* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2003). Population estimates 1860–2015 from U.S. Census Bureau. Population estimates 2020–50 from California Department of Finance, Demographic Research Unit, “Report P-1: Population Projections by Race/Ethnicity, 2010–60 (Baseline 2019),” <http://dof.ca.gov/Forecasting/Demographics/Projections/>.

Note: Population estimates from 1848 to 1880 are for non-native populations. Native populations were not included in the U.S. Census prior to 1890.

a radical tax plan. His near-win inspired left-wing Democrats to fortify social programs and mobilized his opponents, whose furious anti-EPIC counteroffensive places it among the first modern media-driven smear campaigns.⁴

Rapid urban and industrial development during the first decades of the twentieth century accompanied the invention of the automobile and the step-up in oil production preceding World War II. Industrialization during World War II restored the state's golden image, bringing defense-related jobs, federal funds, manufacturing, construction, and dazzling prosperity that accelerated postwar. Ribbons of roads and highways tied new towns to swelling cities and delivered newcomers to California at spectacular rates. The building sector boomed while orange trees blossomed. To address labor shortages, in 1942, the federal “Bracero” program created a new agricultural labor force by facilitating the entry of Mexican laborers into the United States, beckoning millions of men and their families to the country. Their efforts laid the foundations for California's thriving modern agribusiness sector.

Tract-housing developments materialized at an unprecedented rate, spawning demand for roads, water, schools, and other critical infrastructure. In 1947, the state fanned the spread of “car culture” with an ambitious ten-year highway plan that cost \$1 million per working day. Flood control and colossal irrigation projects begun in the 1860s had transformed the San Francisco Bay and the Sacramento–San Joaquin River Delta region from wetlands filled with wildlife into a labyrinth of levees, tunnels, canals, and dams that enabled midcentury farmers to feed expanding populations. Los Angeles continued to invent itself by sprawling across semiarid

southlands, adding manufacturing plants and neighborhoods that survived on water imported from the north, thereby triggering “water wars” that continue to this day. Infrastructure spending was concentrated on moving water to the thirsty south via the State Water Project (SWP), the building of schools, establishing a first-class university system, and keeping freeways flowing—priorities that governors Earl Warren and Edmund “Pat” Brown (Jerry Brown’s father) advanced through the mid-1960s.

UNLEASHING THE INITIATIVE

The political landscape was also changing dramatically midcentury. Cross-filing, which had severely disadvantaged the Democrats for forty years, was effectively eliminated through a 1952 initiative that required candidates’ party affiliations to be printed on primary election ballots. With this important change, Democrats finally realized majority status in 1958 with Pat Brown in the governor’s office and control of both legislative houses.

Several U.S. Supreme Court cases also necessitated fundamental changes in the way that Californians were represented in both the state and national legislatures. Between 1928 and 1965, the state had employed the “federal plan,” modeling its legislature on the U.S. Congress, with an upper house based on geographic areas (counties rather than states) and a lower house based on population. Many attempts had been made to dismantle the federal plan because it produced gross overrepresentation of northern and inland rural interests and severe underrepresentation of southern metropolitan residents in the state Senate (three-fourths of sitting senators represented low-density rural areas), but it remained in place until the U.S. Supreme Court established the “one person–one vote” principle in *Reynolds v. Sims* (1964) and California’s system was judged to be in clear violation of it.⁵ After 1965, political influence passed from legislators representing the north to those representing the south and also from rural “cow counties” to urban interests.

The revival of parties in the legislature during the 1960s was greatly assisted by the Democratic Speaker of the California State Assembly, “Big Daddy” Jesse Unruh, who understood how to influence the reelection of loyal partisans by controlling the flow of campaign donations, what he referred to as the “mother’s milk of politics.”⁶ Unruh also helped orchestrate an overhaul of the legislature through Proposition 1A, a measure designed to “Update the State!” via constitutional cleanup in 1966. Prop 1A *professionalized* the lawmaking body by endowing it with the “three S’s”: higher *salary*, many more *staff*, and year-round *session*. The intent was to free the legislative body from the grip of lobbyists and endow it with essential resources to compete on more equal footing with the executive branch. Lawmakers’ annual pay doubled to \$16,000 to reflect their new full-time status, and staff members were hired to write and analyze bills.

Professionalization transformed the legislature into a highly paid, well-staffed institution that quickly gained a reputation for policy innovation. Within five years, the legislature was described as having “proved itself capable of leading the nation in the development of legislation to deal with some of our most critical problems.”⁷ The applause didn’t last long.

Propelled by anger over skyrocketing property taxes while the state accumulated a multibillion-dollar budget surplus, voters revolted against “spendthrift politicians” who “continue to tax us into poverty.”⁸ Fully realizing the energizing power of a grassroots

political movement through the initiative process, citizens overwhelmingly approved **Proposition 13**, which limited property owners' tax to 1 percent of a property's purchase price and limited increases to 2 percent a year.⁹ Prop 13 also forever changed the rules regarding general taxation by requiring a two-thirds vote to raise any taxes in the state, a **supermajority** rule that can empower a minority determined to block tax increases and by extension can jeopardize the legislature's ability to balance the annual budget. Prop 13 triggered the dramatic use of the initiative process that continues today.

The faith in self-governance and mistrust of politicians that spurred Progressives into action and citizens to approve Prop 13 continued to cause political tremors in California politics. The view that citizens were more trustworthy than their representatives only intensified during the 1980s after three legislators were convicted of bribery in an FBI sting labeled "Shrimpscam" (a fictitious shrimp company "paid" legislators to introduce bills favoring the company), reinforcing the perception that Sacramento was full of corrupt politicians. State lawmakers' reputation for being "arrogant and unresponsive" grew along with the power of *incumbency* (being an elected official) and as membership turnover in the legislature stagnated. In 1990, lawmakers were targeted again, this time by Proposition 140 (discussed in Chapter 4), which imposed term limits on all elected state officials, eliminating the chance to develop a long career in a single office. By 2004, lifelong legislative careers were over.



The passage of Proposition 13 in June 1978 opened a new chapter in California history, demonstrating the power of the initiative. Here the young Governor Jerry Brown meets with one of the initiative's authors, Howard Jarvis (right), to acknowledge the voters' message that government spending must be kept in check. Prop 13 inspired similar tax revolts across the U.S.

Source: Robbins/AP Photos.

Parties and elections continue to be targeted through ballot initiatives. Echoing the old cross-filing law, in 2010 Californians enacted the “Top-Two primary” (Prop 14), a “voter preference primary” system that allows *all* candidates for an office to be listed on one ballot but with their political party affiliation indicated. *All* registered voters, including independents, may cast a vote for whomever they prefer, not just their own party’s candidates. For each state or Congressional office (but not the presidency), the two candidates who receive the most votes move to a runoff in the November general election.¹⁰ Through Prop 11, voters transferred the authority to redraw electoral district lines (boundaries defining the geographic areas that legislators represent) from state lawmakers to an independent body, the Citizens Redistricting Commission, a group *prohibited* from manipulating district boundaries to advantage or disadvantage a party, person, or group, a practice known as gerrymandering. As a group that is reconstituted every ten years, they redrew district maps after the 2010 and 2020 U.S. Censuses.

Voters have also altered policymaking processes by controlling decision-making rules. Proposition 98, enacted in 1988, significantly constrains the legislature by mandating that public schools (grades K–12) and community colleges receive an amount equal to roughly 40 percent of the state’s general fund budget each year. In 2000, voters eased the passage of school bonds by lowering the supermajority vote requirement to 55 percent (from two-thirds).¹¹ Prop 26 recategorizes most “fees and charges” as taxes, subjecting them to a two-thirds supermajority approval, and Proposition 25 allows legislators to pass the state budget with a simple majority vote (lowered from a two-thirds supermajority). Voters also recently mandated that all bills must be in print at least 72 hours before a legislative vote and for audiovisual recordings of all public proceedings to be posted online within 24 hours.¹² This sampling of initiatives reveals a firmly established reform tradition that will continue to reshape California’s government and how it operates.

HYPERDIVERSITY IN A MODERN STATE

Hybrid government reinforces California’s distinctiveness, but probably no condition defines politics in California more than the state’s great human diversity, which is as much a source of rich heritage and culture as it is a divisive force that drives competition for political, economic, and social influence. Differences stemming from ethnicity, race, gender, religion, age, sexuality, ideology, socioeconomic class, and street address (to name but a few sources) do not inevitably breed conflict; however, these differences often are the source of intense clashes in the state. The political realm is where these differences are expressed as divergent goals and ideals in the search for power, group recognition, or public benefits, and the vital challenge for California’s political representatives and institutions is to aggregate interests rather than aggravate them.

A post–World War II baby boom inflated the state’s population, and waves of immigration and migration throughout the mid-to late-twentieth century produced minor political tremors.¹³ A marked national population shift from the northern, formerly industrial “Rust Belt” to the southern Sun Belt boosted California’s economy and population over the latter half of the twentieth century. Another wave of people from Southeast Asia arrived during the late 1960s and 1970s following the Vietnam War, and the most recent influx of immigrants occurred during the 1980s and 1990s with large-scale migration from Mexico and other Latin and Central American countries. California is

home to the largest Asian population in the United States, including Southeast Asians, who constitute the fastest-growing ethnic group in the state (about 15.1 percent overall); Chinatown in San Francisco remains the oldest enclave of its kind in North America.¹⁴ Latinxs, having displaced Whites in 2016 as the state's largest ethnic group, now constitute 40 percent of the state's population.¹⁵

Immigration, legal and illegal, as well as natural population growth have produced a hyperdiverse state in which a multitude of groups vie for public goods, services, recognition, power, and influence, and yet they don't share equal access to conditions that will help them thrive. California's history is littered with examples of civil rights starkly deprived, beginning with the state-sanctioned extermination and enslavement of Native Americans in the 1850s,¹⁶ the internment of Japanese Americans in camps during WWII, and midcentury discriminatory housing and employment laws that enshrined generational inequality and injustice, to name a few. Although Governor Pat Brown signed a fair housing law in 1964 ending discrimination by property owners who refused to rent or sell to non-White persons, voters retaliated with Proposition 13, a constitutional amendment enabling private discrimination and housing segregation. Black people, in particular, were excluded from living in the most desirable neighborhoods and relegated to areas where property values scarcely appreciated in comparison. The U.S. Supreme Court invalidated so-called "**redlining**" arrangements in 1967 as a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection guarantee, but inequitable residential housing patterns have persisted.

Prop 13 helped set the stage for the 1965 Watts Riots (or Watts Rebellion or Uprising) in Los Angeles, where police officers' violent interactions with a Black motorist ignited a six-day episode resulting in 32 deaths and the destruction of 1,000 buildings. The same despair and anger over police brutality echoed in 1992 after four White police officers were acquitted of having severely beaten speeding suspect Rodney King; once again the city erupted into flames, ending in similar property damage and 50 deaths. In late May 2020, after George Floyd gasped that he couldn't breathe and died while pinned under the knee of a Minnesota policeman, the nation exploded in turmoil. National Guard troops patrolled California cities to restore order after rioting and looting of businesses, and masses of peaceful protesters demanded racial justice and reform. Governor Gavin Newsom responded with pledges to repair policing through enforcement of SB 392, a curb on the use of deadly force by law enforcers, and SB 230, which requires implementation of implicit bias and de-escalation training; to continue a moratorium on the death penalty; and to pursue greater social equity through investments in education and health care, among other efforts.

Race and ethnicity continue to stir debates over what it means to be a citizen and who is "deserving" of state benefits. Undocumented immigrants number approximately 2.6 million in California,¹⁷ and impassioned campaigns have been waged over how to treat this shadow population who, despite the state's sanctuary laws, live in fear of federal deportation. Ballot measures concerning immigration-related issues have included denying public benefits to undocumented persons (Prop 187 in 1994, much of which was judged unenforceable), making English the state's official language (1986), and teaching children only in English (passed in 1998) and then restoring non-English language instruction almost twenty years later (in 2016).¹⁸ Recently, state lawmakers have granted undocumented immigrants legal aid to fight deportation; Cal Grants and in-state tuition rates for "DREAMers" (the California Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act, known as the DREAM Act, was signed into law in 2011, benefiting about 75,000 college and university

students who have undocumented status¹⁹), rendering California one of twenty-four states or education systems to do so²⁰; health care for low-income undocumented persons²¹; and noncommercial driver's licenses through AB 60,²² which some oppose for symbolic and practical reasons even though evidence shows that licensing undocumented individuals helps reduce hit-and-run accidents,²³ and this right exists in sixteen other states and the District of Columbia.²⁴ California will also replace all references to "aliens" with the term "non-citizen" in state statutes (laws).

Residential patterns also raise questions about the relative values of cultural assimilation and cultural preservation. Also known to representatives as "communities of interest," certain neighborhoods, barrios, "Little Saigons," or "Chinatowns" have performed the historical role of absorbing foreign laborers and refugees, among them approximately 50,000 Vietnamese who arrived after the Vietnam War and approximately 3 million Latinxs who joined family members in the United States as part of a 1986 federal amnesty program. The trends of "balkanization" (communities separated by race or ethnicity) and **gentrification** (the movement of affluent residents into renovated city zones from which poorer residents have been displaced) have become more pronounced during recent decades, reflecting widening income inequality. These patterns are also manifest in five radically different community types identified by political geographers, who call them the "Five Californias."²⁵ Indicated mainly by income and education levels, health, and related opportunities, the realities that these five different social classes experience translate into divergent sociopolitical needs and demands. As the majority struggle fiercely to make ends meet, the top One Percent thrive while they both disproportionately fund state government and influence policy (see Chapter 9).

The sheer volume of basic human and special needs created by this hyperdiversity has tended to outstrip government capacity in the areas of health care, housing, public education, legal aid and correctional services, infrastructure development, environmental protection, and public welfare. Population growth will continue to drive taxation, budget, and policy debates, providing plenty of fissures that will test the foundations of state government, especially during economic downturns when people's needs multiply.

RECALLING A GOVERNOR, TAKE ONE

The constant hum of gradual population change contrasts sharply with the sudden jolts that unexpected events can send through a political system. The most significant political earthquake of the new millennium in California hit in 2003 with the recall of Governor Gray Davis, a dizzying, circus-like event that solidified the state's image as a national outlier. The mild-mannered Governor Davis had gained a reputation as a "pay-to-play" politician who rewarded friendly public employee unions with generous contracts and was blamed for tripling the car tax, sky-high electricity bills, and overdue budgets that contained accounting gimmicks.²⁶ For the first time ever, enough signatures were gathered to trigger a special recall election, and a few months later, Californians would use direct democracy to replace their governor and simultaneously choose a successor.²⁷ More than half (55.4 percent) of voters decided to shake up government and selected "yes" on the recall question, and almost half of them (48.7 percent) chose actor Arnold Schwarzenegger to replace Davis.

Having overpowered 134 competitors, Republican Governor Schwarzenegger positioned himself as a political outsider and assumed centrist positions, championing the environment



Schoolchildren in Escondido are among the state's plurality (40 percent) Latinx population. In 2020–21 they represented more than half (55 percent) of all students enrolled in California K–12 public schools, whereas non-Hispanic Whites were 22 percent, Asian and Pacific Islanders were 10 percent, and African Americans were 5 percent.

Source: Sandy Huffaker/Corbis via Getty Images.

and government reform, and earning the label of “RINO” (Republican in Name Only) from his detractors because he worked closely with Democratic leaders. His climate-friendly legacy includes having signed AB 32, the nation's first law to regulate greenhouse gas emissions, which provides a foundation for the state's carbon emissions cap-and-trade system and greenhouse gas-related mandates (see Chapter 4 for more about AB 32).²⁸ Schwarzenegger may also be remembered for a jaw-dropping \$27 billion budget deficit that mushroomed near the end of his term.

Closing the monumental budget gap topped Democratic Governor Jerry Brown's agenda when he took office—for the second time in his life—during the “Great Recession” in 2011. Extensive public service informed Brown's approach the second time around: he had held a variety of state, party, and local offices including state attorney general and Oakland mayor after having served two terms as one of the youngest governors in state history (1975–80).²⁹ Now Edmund G. “Jerry” Brown addressed budget deficits by obtaining voters' approval of new taxes to fund public education (Prop 30) and he sliced health care and education funding that fellow Democrats considered sacred. California's “green economy” flourished under Brown, and the state emerged as a major engine in the nation's economic recovery and acceleration. In his final term as the oldest governor in California history, his “progressive Democratic” values collided with those of the conservative-minded President Trump. When federal rollbacks of environmental protections intensified, Brown called the Trump administration's approach “a miasma of nonsense,”³⁰ and with the attorney general's help, the state sued the Trump administration (usually successfully) more than 100 times over weaker water and air pollution standards, immigration, oil and gas extraction, pesticide regulations, and more.³¹

Under federal court orders to reduce rampant overcrowding in state prisons, Brown also aggressively pursued prison reform. Through shifting nonserious, nonviolent, nonsexual inmates (known as “triple-nons”) to county jails and parole, the incarcerated population was reduced to levels at or below federal court mandates in a process called “**realignment**.” Brown also resisted creating new crimes, reversed automatic sentencing enhancements through new laws, granted a record number of pardons and commutations, and endorsed the popular initiative revising the state’s “three-strikes” law to impose life sentences only for violent and serious felonies.³²

If California had appeared “ungovernable” when Brown took office, the four-term governor helped restore the state’s reputation for being “exceptional” in both positive and negative ways. Flush with four straight years of budget surpluses and an economic engine that had revved California’s GDP into the world’s top five, the state was also bursting with homelessness and astronomically high housing costs; wrestling with drought, wildfires, and the Trump administration; and nursing an ever-expanding inequality gap. Brown’s replacement, Gavin Newsom, had his work cut out for him when he took office in 2019.



On any given night, approximately 69,000 people experience homelessness in Los Angeles County. In 2023, Mayor Karen Bass stepped up efforts to clear out homeless encampments and help move residents into temporary and permanent housing.

Source: Ted Soqui/AP Photos.

PANDEMIC POLITICS AND SURVIVING A RECALL

Fresh from the 2018 elections that returned a Democratic supermajority to the legislature and all but one executive office, former San Francisco mayor and Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom assumed office during a time of relative prosperity. However, with earth-shaking power, almost

overnight the coronavirus pandemic scrambled life as most people knew it. In March 2020, anticipating a surge in COVID-19 cases, Newsom became the first U.S. governor to declare a state of emergency and ordered all residents to shelter in place, a shutdown that extended to all schools and nonessential business and government operations. Over seemingly endless months, social unrest grew: first among those who wanted the economy to reopen faster and then by multitudes pushing for racial justice and changes to policing policies. Mass protests, demonstrations, marches, and uprisings marked the summer of 2020.³³

Newsom's exercise of emergency powers affected all aspects of life, from mandatory mask-wearing to business closures, actions that prompted relief among supporters and outrage among opponents, some of whom were determined to oust the governor through a recall election. After a judge extended the deadline for collecting signatures (due to COVID restrictions), the signature threshold was met in March 2021 and Newsom would become the fourth governor in U.S. history to defend his seat before the end of his term.³⁴

Despite public commotion over COVID restrictions and Newsom's personal missteps (namely, attending an unmasked dinner party at a posh restaurant after warning citizens to avoid indoor gatherings),³⁵ ultimately the governor's popularity among most Democrats and independents proved stronger than the contempt of his foes, particularly as the field of 46 potential replacements took shape. Newsom successfully dissuaded strong Democratic competitors from entering the race as a Republican frontrunner emerged: Black conservative radio talk show host Larry Elder, whose provocative style echoed that of President Trump. In an all-mail ballot election held October 2021, Newsom survived the recall attempt by attracting the same vote percentage with which he had been initially elected (61.9 percent), essentially sealing his reelection in 2022 and prompting calls to reform the recall process (see Chapter 3).

As COVID restrictions loosened, most Californians continued to be stung by the global pandemic's lingering effects which local and state governments could do little to ease. Even as the state banked billions more tax revenues than projected—a sign that the top one percenters were thriving—unreliable supply chains and skyrocketing prices of everything from gas to rents and food thwarted Newsom's aim to build “a more inclusive and equitable future for all.”³⁶ In that vein, his priorities have included making affordable housing more accessible through tax refunds and emergency rental assistance, and his budgets have dedicated billions to address homelessness such as through Project Roomkey (also Homekey), a grant program for converting motels and hotels into safe, transitional housing for people who are homeless. Newsom has endorsed accelerated minimum wage increases (rising to \$15.50 per hour on January 1, 2023 compared to \$7.25 at the federal level), and devised low-carbon climate change initiatives such as requiring new construction to use clean energy and all new cars sold in California to be electric by 2035. Also, in response to the U.S. Supreme Court's reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, a judgment granting states the right to decide whether abortion should be legal within their boundaries, Newsom sought to expand reproductive rights and abortion access through state grants and supported a state constitutional amendment to enshrine abortion rights.

Efforts such as these have not stemmed the flow of outmigration, and California has been losing residents to other states since 2001.³⁷ For the first time in history, during the pandemic, the state's population actually declined: births did not offset the number of people moving out of the state, and because other states' populations have been rising faster, California lost a seat in the House of Representatives in 2020 (now at 52 seats, still the most by far). Despite a historic

budget surplus driven by the top income earners, for the majority of Californians, unaffordable housing, water shortages, soaring living costs, and the hazards of extreme weather events have made *simply getting by* the new “California dream.”



A viral video of George Floyd’s last words, “I can’t breathe,” and death at the hands of Minneapolis police provoked outrage, unprecedented demonstrations for racial justice, and an outcry against police brutality, including this uprising in Los Angeles on May 30, 2020.

Source: Warrick Page via Getty Images.

CONCLUSION: POLITICAL EARTHQUAKES AND EVOLVING INSTITUTIONS

Like real seismic events, political earthquakes are difficult to predict. Some of the tensions that produce them are ever present, such as in the demographic fault lines that underlie inequalities or define the uneasy alliance between representative and direct democracy. Periodic ruptures that take the form of ballot measures, recall elections, landmark legislation, or even uprisings release some of that tension. Although political earthquakes may be triggered by conditions or events that can’t be controlled—such as a pandemic, a weak global economy, a new federal administration, or Supreme Court decisions—the shock waves these events produce have the potential to bring about transformations both large and small. Throughout California’s history, political earthquakes have reconfigured relationships between the elected and the governed, between citizens and their governing institutions, and among citizens. Each of these upheavals has involved choices about who may use power and how they may do so legitimately. Rules have also mattered: in some cases, the shake-ups were about whether to change the rules themselves, whereas in other cases the rules shaped the alternatives available and determined who could choose among them, be they voters, legislators, or other

leaders such as governors. Often, policy decisions provoke supercharged emotional reactions because they raise questions about shared values and have the potential to shape the social, economic, and political culture in which people will live. Finally, history also plays a role in creating opportunities for action or in creating conditions that shape alternatives. As this historical review demonstrates, California's past pulses in the political institutions, culture, rules, and choices of today, which in turn will provide keys to unlocking the Golden State's political future.

KEY TERMS

Big Four: Collis Huntington, Mark Hopkins, Leland Stanford, and Charles Crocker, four railroad tycoons who wielded disproportionate influence over California politics, having owned the Central (later Southern) Pacific Railroad that built the western length of the transcontinental railroad (1863–69).

Civil service: government employment that is not based on political party loyalty alone but rather on merit that is usually earned through professional training and experience. Endorsed by Progressives.

Cross-filing: an early form of an open primary election, in which the name of any candidate (minus political party affiliation) could appear on any political party's primary election ballot. Officially in effect in California from 1913 to 1959.

Gentrification: the movement of affluent residents into renovated city zones from which poorer residents have been displaced.

Nonpartisan: elections in which names of candidates (usually for local offices) appear on ballots without party labels. Established by Progressives.

Patronage: the awarding of government jobs to political party loyalists.

Professionalization: Proposition 1A in 1966 made the state legislature a full-time operation resembling the U.S. Congress; professional legislators have high salaries,

many full-time staff members, and year-round sessions.

Progressivism: members of a national political movement that took root in state-based political parties of that name in the early 1900s; they tried to reform government to rid it of special interests and return it to “the people.” Notable actions in California included electoral reforms such as the establishment of direct democracy.

Proposition 13: a landmark proposition in 1978 that limited property taxes to 1 percent of the purchase price of a property and imposed a two-thirds vote threshold for raising taxes. Rekindled Californians' usage of the initiative process.

Realignment: the process of shifting state prison inmates to county jails and parole in order to reduce prison overcrowding.

Redlining: a residential zoning practice whereby certain (more desirable) areas are declared “off-limits” to members of minority groups, indicated by red lines on city maps; until 1967 this was employed as a means of keeping Black people and other minorities from settling in “White” neighborhoods.

Supermajority: a majority rule that requires reaching a threshold above 50 percent plus one. The threshold is commonly two-thirds in California for raising taxes and passing urgency measures.