

1

INTRODUCTION

OUTLINE

Principles for Understanding California Politics

As if the State of California weren't exceptional enough, it could be considered one of the largest countries in the world. Only four other nations had a larger gross domestic product than California in 2021, and its \$3.36 trillion economy outrivaled those of India and all European countries except Germany.¹ With nearly 40 million residents, the state's population is on par with that of Canada.² In 2022, California was home to 186 billionaires, more than in Hong Kong and Russia combined.³ Its territorial spread includes breathtaking coastlines, fertile farmland both natural and human made, one of the globe's hottest deserts, the highest and lowest points in the continental United States, dense urban zones, twenty-one mountain ranges, and ancient redwood forests—a resource-rich expanse with 1,100 miles of coastline and an area that could accommodate a dozen East Coast states.

Through good times and bad, California's reputation for being the “great exception” among the American states has intensified since the political journalist Carey McWilliams characterized it that way in 1949. The state is an exaggeration; it sparks global trends, and national and world issues permeate the state's politics. California is a state of extremes: climate change, cost of living, immigration, civil rights, public health crises, economic tides, and waves of social unrest push and pull on those who make policy decisions for one of the world's most diverse political communities.

Unlike elected officials in most democratic governments, however, California's representatives share responsibility for policymaking with ordinary Californians, who make laws through the initiative process at the state and local levels. This **hybrid political system** (a combination of direct and representative democracy) provides an outlet for voters' general distrust of politicians and dissatisfaction with representative government and enables the electorate to reshape it over time. If **politics** is a process through which people with differing goals and ideals try to manage their conflicts by working together to allocate values (valued things) for society—which requires bargaining and compromise—then California's system is especially susceptible to repeated attempts to fix what's perceived as broken, and parts of it may be periodically upended. For more than 100 years, the initiative process has permitted voters, wealthy corporations, and interest groups to experiment with the state's political system, from rebooting elections to

retuning taxation rates to reworking the lawmaking rules. Some of these reforms, which are discussed throughout this book, are celebrated as triumphs. Proposition 13 in 1978, for example, deflated ballooning property tax rates for homeowners (limited to 1 percent of the property's sale price) and arrested rate increases. On the other hand, direct democracy tends to promote all-or-nothing solutions that have been contrived without bargaining and compromise, two hallmarks of democratic lawmaking.

Despite people's faith in their own abilities to govern themselves, California's bulging population ensures that public policy issues exist on a massive scale, absorbing the attention of tens of thousands of policymakers at the local and state levels. More than one of every eight U.S. residents lives in majority-minority California, and 26.6 percent of Californians are foreign-born—the largest proportion among the states, with most immigrants today arriving from Asia as opposed to Latin America in recent years.⁴ Among the entire population are approximately 2.6 million undocumented immigrants.⁵ In 2010, just over 10 percent of the population was over age 65; by 2030, it will be one out of four people—a demographic group that saturates health-care systems.⁶ California's criminal population is second only to that of Texas in size; about 140,000 remain in custody or are under some form of correctional control. Over half of the nation's unsheltered persons live in California, their futures complicated by a severe affordable housing shortage.⁷

These days, high inflation rates and sharply rising costs of living and doing business are squeezing most Californians: combined bills from groceries, gasoline, housing, energy, and other basic necessities have contributed to the out-migration of companies and people to states that are more affordable overall.⁸ More homeowners are cashing out and moving out as rapidly rising home values have created record-high home equity, wealth that concentrates among older residents. California's population has *declined* for the first time in its history. In response to these developments, and thanks to a \$308 billion budget (2022–23) that places California on a scale with small nations, Governor Gavin Newsom and Democratic legislators have allocated \$17 billion for broad-based relief in the form of tax refunds; grants and assistance programs for renters, homeowners, and small businesses; accelerated the minimum wage increase to \$15.50 for all employers as of January 1, 2023 (it's even higher in some cities); and raised aid payments to low-income residents. The state manages an unusually strong set of resources and aims to spread them widely, barring an economic recession.

Californians have found plenty of ways to distinguish themselves politically from the rest of the country, although they resemble most Americans in their general aversion to politics and feeling overtaxed.⁹ The state votes Democratic: fully 63.5 percent of Californians voted for presidential nominee Joe Biden in 2020, repudiating Republican President Trump (only the percentages from Hawai'i, Maryland, and Vermont were higher) in the 2020 race.¹⁰ California was among the first states to legally recognize a third gender option, enabling persons who do not identify as either female or male to mark "X" instead on official documents, and since 2003 has legally protected persons from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity expression. The state is poised to manufacture its own low-cost insulin supply for diabetics. The nation's first consumer privacy law, now over five years old, gives individuals more control over their personal information. Following the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, California voters also added reproductive rights to the state constitution in 2022.



Senate President Pro Tem Toni Atkins (2018–present) plays a role in authoring landmark bills such as SCA 10, a Senate Constitutional Amendment to include reproductive rights in the state constitution. The legislature voted to place it on the November 2022 ballot and voters approved it by a large margin.

Source: California Senate Democrats via YouTube.

California has also tested the boundaries of federal versus state power in recent years. In defiance of Donald Trump administration policies that elected Democrats perceived to be antienvironment, the state doubled down on combating climate change through investments in green energy and tougher greenhouse gas emissions standards that it had been the first to establish in state law (Assembly Bill (AB) 32). California was the first state to legalize marijuana use for medical purposes in 1996 but behind several states in approving its recreational use in 2016. The state also successfully defended DACA (the federal Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program) in court on behalf of California’s 183,000 “DREAMers” (children who were brought to the United States without documentation and have grown up in the country without formal legal status), and the state’s longstanding DREAM Act (AB 540) extends in-state tuition and financial aid eligibility to approximately 75,000 students in California’s public universities and community colleges.¹¹ Controversially, with Senate Bill (SB) 54 in 2017, the state became a “sanctuary” for nonviolent, noncriminal undocumented immigrants. As a **sanctuary state**, local and state law enforcement officials are prohibited from expending their resources to help federal agents enforce deportations, with exceptions for public safety considerations: local police have discretion to hold violent felons for federal authorities, immigration agents may interview jailed individuals, and database information may be shared about convicted criminals. Otherwise, state officials will not aid the Department of Homeland Security in targeting undocumented persons for removal from the United States. State Republican lawmakers have not succeeded in repealing these rights, and federal courts have affirmed that states have no obligation to enforce federal law.¹² The state also has ensured that state and local governments cannot use personal information to create religious registries of any kind.

Extreme weather events and their effects amplify California’s distinctiveness, yet as former Governor Jerry Brown warned, it’s “the new normal.”¹³ Extended drought and a bark beetle infestation have stricken forests, killing 172 million trees since 2010 and placing the rest in “mortal peril,” elevating the risk of both wildfires and erosion that can transform whole regions into catastrophic infernos.¹⁴ Of the twenty largest fires recorded in the past 90 years, all but two occurred in the last two decades.¹⁵ The continued overpumping of groundwater due to lack of rain has caused land to sink faster than ever, a phenomenon called *subsidence* that buckles roads, irrigation canals, bridges, and pipes, costing state and local governments millions to fix. Climate extremes also include sudden deluges carried by atmospheric rivers, as in 2023, that can devastate infrastructure—although California is hardly alone in its vulnerability to such events.¹⁶



CalFIRE (Department of Forestry and Fire Protection) operates over 530 facilities statewide and will add new firefighter crews, infrastructure such as helicopter bases, and equipment in the next few years to help prevent and fight drought-fueled wildfires.

Source: Luis Sinco via Getty Images.

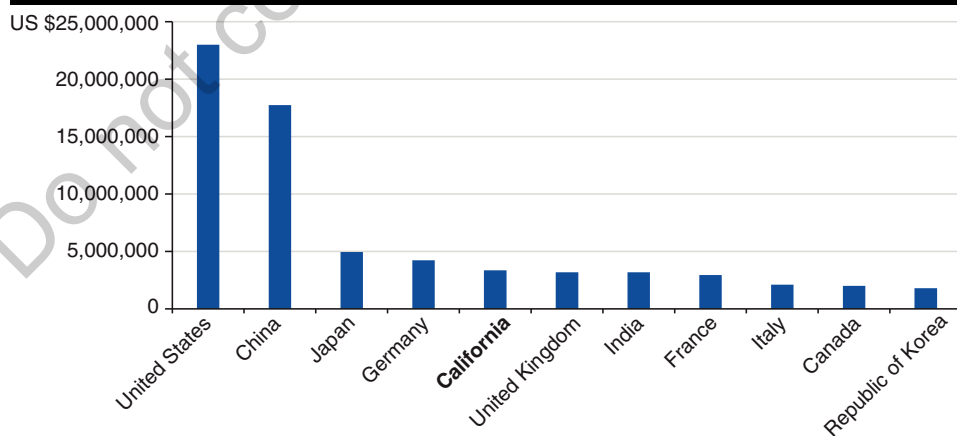
Water shortages have choked farmland, fisheries, and towns; they’ve forced steep cutbacks on water use and starved hydroelectric power plants—only to be replaced by floods. Typically, Central Valley Farmers jockey for the same water that helps feed Southern California, and they are pitted against environmentalists over how much flow should be diverted to replenish the failing Delta ecosystem, the complex Sacramento–San Joaquin River Delta estuary located east of San Francisco. A plan to pipe Sacramento River water underneath the imperiled Delta through a giant tunnel is the latest in a sixty-year saga of proposals that contains more drama than a Netflix series.¹⁷ The current proposition, which would likely take at least ten years to realize and whose price tag would surpass the size of many states’ entire annual budgets, illustrates

the magnitude of issues in California, and also demonstrates the hazards of shifting from the status quo when big money and high-powered interests are at stake.

The availability, cost, distribution, storage, and cleanliness of fresh water represent a fraction of the complex, interrelated issues that state and local elected officials deal with year-round, a “must-do” list that grows perpetually. Climate change is altering delicate ecosystems, spawning invasive pests that carry infectious diseases, and it affects whether California can supply the fresh produce, craft beer, and wines that the world enjoys. Sustainability challenges loom while deteriorating bridges, roads, storm drains, water mains and storage, sewage treatment facilities, schools, and jails compete for the public’s limited attention and money. New and affordable housing and expanding broadband access are also among the state’s public **infrastructure** needs, systems that earn mostly C- and D grades for being in mediocre condition overall and requiring attention.¹⁸ These needs range into the hundreds of billions of dollars, a deep hole that the state continues to fill—currently through an ambitious (but realistic) multiyear \$52 billion infrastructure plan that builds on significant prior year investments and budget surpluses, as well as substantial federal commitments that will add billions more (Figure 1.1).¹⁹

Whether the goal is greater police accountability, lowering college fees, or restricting offshore oil drilling, different interests compete through the political process to get what they want. From small cities to Sacramento, governing officials weigh private against public interests, and generally they work hard to fix problems experienced by their constituents—a job that also requires them to balance the needs of their own districts against those of their city, county, or the entire state. This grand balancing act is but one reason politics often appears irrational and complex, but like the U.S. government, California’s system was designed that way, mostly through deliberate choice but also in response to the unintended consequences of prior decisions. California’s puzzle of governing institutions reflects repeated attempts to manage conflicts that result from millions of people putting demands on a system that creates both winners

FIGURE 1.1 ■ Gross Domestic Product, 2021 (in Millions)

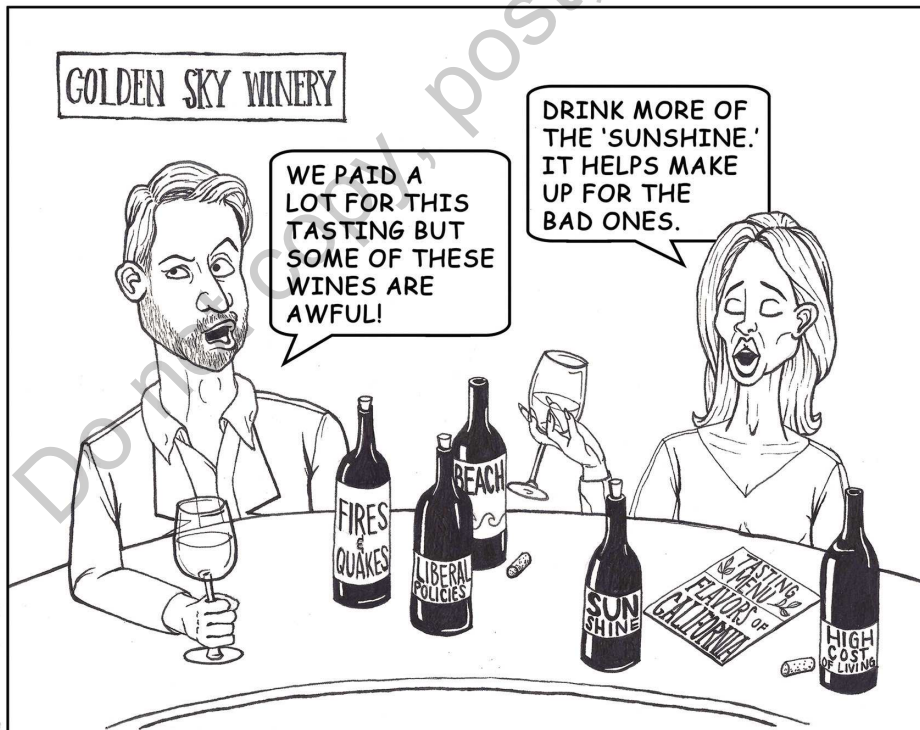


Sources: “Gross Domestic Product 2022,” World Bank, July 1, 2022, <https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>; “GDP by State, 2021,” Bureau of Economic Analysis, Interactive Tools, updated March 31, 2022.

and losers—not all of whom give up quietly when they lose. Like their federal counterparts, state officials tend to respond to the most persistent, organized, and well-funded members of society; on the other hand, some losers in California can reverse their fortunes by skillfully employing the tools of direct democracy to sidestep elected representatives altogether.

PRINCIPLES FOR UNDERSTANDING CALIFORNIA POLITICS

It may seem counterintuitive given the complexity of the state's problems, but California's politics can be explained and understood logically—although political outcomes are just as often frustrating and irresponsible as they are praiseworthy and necessary. In short, six fundamental concepts—choice, political culture, institutions, collective action, rules, and history—can help us understand state politics just as they help us understand national or even local democratic politics. These concepts are employed throughout this book to explain how Californians and their representatives make governing decisions and to provide a starting point for evaluating California's political system: does it work as intended? Do citizens have realistic expectations about what problems government can solve, the services or values it provides, and how efficiently it can do so? How does California's political system compare to others?



Source: Ava Van Vechten.

Choices: At the Heart of Politics. Our starting point is the premise that *choices* are at the core of politics. Citizens make *explicit* political choices when they decide not to participate in an election or when they cast a vote, but they also make *implicit* political choices when they send their children to private instead of public schools or refill a water bottle instead of buying a new one. Legislators’ jobs consist of a series of choices regarding what to say, which issues to ignore, whose recommendations to take, which phone calls to return, and how to cast a vote. Choices are shaped by not only personal, “micro-level” factors such as values, beliefs, and background but also larger, “macro-level” forces in society, politics, the economy, and the immediate setting where rules, bargaining, and compromise come into play (Figure 1.2).

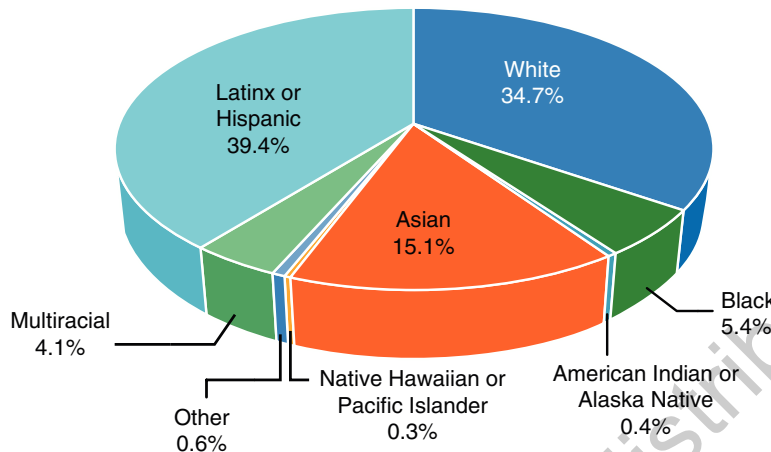
BOX 1.1

COMPARATIVE FAST FACTS ON CALIFORNIA

	California	Texas	United States
Capital	Sacramento	Austin	Washington, D.C.
Statehood	September 9, 1850 (31st state)	December 29, 1845 (28th state)	Declared independence from Great Britain July 4, 1776
Number of US House Members	52 (one less after 2020)	38 (two more after 2020)	435
Number of Counties	58	254	50 states
Largest City by Population*	Los Angeles, 3,849,297	Houston, 2,288,250	New York, 8,467,513
Total Population*	39,237,836	29,527,941	331,893,745
Percentage of Foreign-Born Persons, 2021*	26.6%	16.8%	13.5%
Median Annual Household Income (2020 Dollars)*	\$78,672	\$63,826	\$64,994
Percentage of Persons Living below Poverty Level*	11.5%	13.4%	11.4%

*Population/demographic figures are based on the U.S. 2020 Census; estimates were current as of July 1, 2021 (“Quickfacts,” U.S. Census Bureau, July 1, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/CA,US/PST045221>). California’s Department of Finance (DOF) estimated the state population at 39,185,606 (on January 1, 2022), or 117,552 fewer than in the previous year. “Slowing State Population Decline Puts Latest Population at 39,185,000,” DOF, State of California, May 2, 2022.

Source: “QuickFacts: Population Estimates, July 1, 2021,” U.S. Census Bureau, accessed July 31, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/CA>.

FIGURE 1.2 ■ Racial and Ethnic Makeup of California

Source: "QuickFacts: Population Estimates, July 1, 2021," U.S. Census Bureau, accessed July 31, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/CA>.

Political Culture: *Collective Attitudes and Beliefs About the Role of Government.* In large, heterogeneous societies crammed with people motivated by different goals, interests, and values, a successful political system provides a process for narrowing choices to a manageable number and allows many participants to reconcile their differences as they make choices together. The decisions and customs that emerge from this process generally express the attitudes, beliefs, norms, and values about government that a political majority holds, and give their governing system a distinct culture—a **political culture** that varies from state to state. Compared to Texans or Nevadans, Californians tend to focus on equity and are more willing to regulate businesses in favor of workers and the environment and to offer public programs that address those at the margins of society. Three other features that define California's political culture are a historical fondness for reforming government through ballot measures, a preference for Democratic officials but general detachment from political parties, and a willingness to use state regulatory power—themes that will resurface throughout this book as we examine California's exceptionalism.

Institutions: *Organizations and Systems That Help People Solve Collective Action Problems.* Political systems also facilitate compromises, trade-offs, and bargains that lead to acceptable solutions or alternatives. Institutions help organize this kind of action. Political **institutions** are organizations built to manage conflict by defining particular roles and rules for those who participate in them. In short, they bring people together to solve problems on behalf of a community or society, enabling the authoritative, or official, use of power. Election systems are a good example: there are rules about who can vote and who can run for office, how the process will be controlled, and how disputes resulting from them will be resolved. Through institutions like elections, **collective action**—working together for mutual benefit—can take place. The same can be said of other institutions such as traffic courts and political parties; in each setting, people work together to solve their problems and allocate goods for a society. It should be noted, however, that the use

of power and authority through political institutions can benefit some and harm others; fair and equal outcomes are not automatically ensured through democratic institutions.

Rules: *Codes or Regulations Defining How Governing Power May Be Used.* Rules also matter. Rules are authoritative statements, codes, or regulations that define who possesses the power to help govern and how they may legitimately use it, and rules create incentives for action or inaction. Rules are framed in constitutions; they may be expressed as laws or in administrative rules, executive orders, or court opinions, for example. For instance, if one party reaches supermajority status in the state legislature (as has been the case with Democrats since 2016), the minority party is rendered virtually powerless because their votes are not needed to pass special bills or taxes that require approval by two-thirds of the membership. Unwritten rules, also known as **norms**, also guide behavior, and daily interactions help enforce what is expected and acceptable, as reflected in the degree of civility among politicians.

History: *The Past Helps Set the Terms of the Present.* Rules are also the results of choices made throughout history, and over time, a body of rules will change and grow in response to cultural shifts, influential leaders, uprisings, natural disasters, scandals, economic trends, and other forces—some gradual, some sudden—creating further opportunities and incentives for political action. Enormous economic tides that define eras (think the Great Recession or the Great Depression) exert especially disruptive forces in politics because behemoth governments are not designed to respond nimbly to rapid and unanticipated changes; budgets and programs are planned months and years in advance, with history providing clues to decision makers about probable developments. Sudden readjustments, particularly those made in hard times, will reverberate far into the future.

Thus, recognizing that both choices and the rules that condition them are made within a given historical context goes a long way toward explaining each state's distinctive political system. A state's political culture also contributes to that distinctiveness. These are the elements that make New York's state government so different from the governments of Idaho, Tennessee, and every other state, and we should keep them in mind as we consider how California's governing institutions developed—and whether California belongs in a class of its own. In essence, a unique set of rules, its culture, and its history are key to understanding California politics. They help explain the relationship between Californians and their government, how competing expectations and values propel change, and why elected officials can have a hard time running the state, even when times are good—and especially when they're not.

Many influencers, from *New York Times* editors to business leaders, have at one point or another declared California to be teetering on the brink of collapse, “ungovernable,” or a lost paradise. That chatter is being revived as economic conditions push a greater number of people to leave or consider leaving the state for more affordable places. Among those who either cannot leave or can afford to stay, the sentiment that things can and should be better motivates many to pursue change through politics at the local and state levels. And, like the journalist Carey McWilliams, they believe that “nothing is quite yet what it should be in California.”²⁰

The Golden State remains a land of mythical proportions, set apart from the rest by its commanding economy, geography, and population. And as with fairy-tale giants, it falls hard when calamity hits, and recovery takes an agonizingly long time. On the other hand, a pumping economic engine has led to record budgets and reserves, and recently that largesse has translated into

targeted state spending on infrastructure and broad-based relief in ways that reflect the majority party Democrats' vision of social justice. This book explores the reasons for the current state of affairs and evaluates how history, culture, institutions, and rules contribute to the sense that California is exceptional. Diverse generations have brought its distinctiveness to life, and collectively they have created a political system that at first glance seems incomparable in all its complexity, experimentation, and breadth. In this book we ask whether California is a justifiable outlier, a state whose politics defy simple categorization. Along the way, we also consider what it will take for California to achieve the foundational aim of a democracy: for government to serve the people's welfare and interests effectively, comprehensively, and sensibly over the long term.



The California state capitol building in Sacramento serves as a stage for public demonstrations and events.

Source: Renée B. Van Vechten.

KEY TERMS

Collective action: working together for mutual benefit.

Hybrid political system: a political system that combines elements of direct and representative democracy.

Infrastructure: physical facilities, structures, installations, or systems providing essential services to societies, such as

roads, airports, water treatment plants, or internet connectivity.

Institutions: systems and organizations that help people solve their collective action problems by defining particular roles and rules for those who participate in them and by managing conflict.

Norms: unwritten rules that guide acceptable or expected behavior, enforced through daily interactions.

Political culture: the attitudes, beliefs, and values about government that a majority in a state hold, as expressed in their customs and the political choices its citizens and leaders make.

Politics: a process of bargaining and compromise through which people with differing goals and ideals try to manage

their conflicts by working together to allocate values for society.

Sanctuary state: a term referring to a state that adopts policies or laws shielding undocumented immigrants from federal arrest or deportation, through one or more measures; California law prohibits state law enforcement from cooperating with federal authorities in facilitating the apprehension or deportation of persons with unauthorized status.

Do not copy, post, or distribute