

Casting a Long Shadow: Californians' Distrust of Government

As California approached the threshold of the 21st century, it seemed to be entering a golden era. Confidence in the economy was the highest it had been in decades. Yet for the public, a dark shadow dimmed that golden glow, making Californians less sanguine about the more distant future. That shadow was largely distrust of government and lack of confidence that it could cope with the formidable challenges taking shape in the state—rapid population growth, increasing racial and ethnic diversity, a crumbling infrastructure, congestion, pollution, energy shortages, and a host of other problems that seemed to be lacking the attention from government they deserved. In September 2001, the nation suffered savage attacks on New York and Washington, and the hopes of extending the nation's all-too-brief period of peace, prosperity, and security seemed to vanish overnight. The golden "era" in California proved to be more of a golden "moment." Nonetheless, it provided deep insights into how distrust of government has played out on the state's social, economic, and political stage and what it portends for the future of the state and perhaps even the nation.

In *A California State of Mind: The Conflicted Voter in a Changing World*, Mark Baldassare examines the opinions, concerns, public policy preferences, and ballot choices of Californians during the fleeting moment of prosperity that roughly coincided with the 2000 election cycle. Baldassare first provides an in-depth view of residents' thoughts on several crucial policy issues: taxes and government spending, public schools, and the environment. He then discusses how rapidly changing demographics, particularly in the form of a growing Latino population, are reshaping the state's politics. He next turns his attention to the ways in which political trends tied to distrust of government and elected officials are giving California the character of an "un-party" state. By this, Baldassare means that political clout has increasingly come to reside outside the major parties—in the dual form of a grow-

Californians' on Government

- "The whole government system's a bureaucratic mess."
- "Officials don't listen to us."
- "We don't know where our tax money goes."
- "They don't deserve more money unless they use it wisely."
- "No higher taxes for better schools. We throw money at them. Accountability first."
- "Growth is not the problem—lack of planning and poor authority is."
- "Planning is after-the-fact crisis management. There is no long-range planning."
- "Politicians fix only what gets them elected."
- "I'd like it if we could vote on everything, so they don't make decisions for us."
- "This whole episode with the energy crisis has totally shaken my belief in the government having a grip on what's going on."

Source: Focus groups conducted with residents of San Diego, Los Angeles, Sacramento, and Santa Clara (May 1999, April 2001).

ing number of independent voters and an enthusiastic use of the initiative process. His discussion then focuses on the other side of the 2000 elections and how the electricity crisis led Californians into greater despair and made them even more uneasy about their government's ability to comprehend and effectively deal with the serious problems facing the nation's most populous state. Baldassare concludes with a

commentary on the insights discussed in the book and offers a series of recommendations that might help restore Californians' confidence in their government and elected officials.

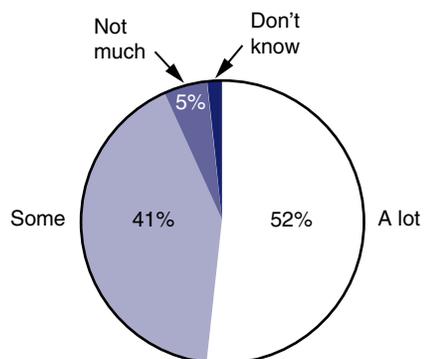
To gather data for his analysis, Baldassare convened 14 focus groups and conducted 11 large-scale public opinion surveys throughout the state. The surveys asked over 22,000 Californians between September 1999 and January 2001 about their public policy preferences; ballot choices; and political, social, and economic perceptions and attitudes. Baldassare also used data from a variety of other sources, including exit polls, election tallies, the U.S. Census, government statistics, and national public opinion surveys, to round out his analysis.

The Policy Environment

One of the most prominent themes in the book is that Californians simply do not trust their elected officials to spend taxpayers' money wisely or to be responsive to the public's needs and desires. Even during the economic prosperity and budget surpluses experienced at the end of the Clinton administration, the tax revolt that began with Proposition 13 in the late 1970s was a viable force. Baldassare observes that the message behind this proposition—that voters are not pleased by the way governments go about their taxing-and-spending business—is one that the state's elected officials correctly fear is still a relevant and threatening force at the ballot box.

This distrust of government is evident in the political climate surrounding the major policy issues of the day. For example, although Californians named schools and education as the most important issue facing the state, time and again in the surveys, they voiced their lack of trust in school officials and state government. They supported allocating existing state funds in a manner that favored schools, but they were not willing to pay higher taxes to support increased school spending. Concerns about population growth and the environment were also paramount in the public mind at the turn of the century. But few residents

Do you think the people in state government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste much of it?



Source: PPIC Statewide Survey, January 1999.

expressed much confidence and trust in state government's ability to resolve environmental problems. Most preferred to implement local growth controls through the initiative process.

Improving Governance in California

Baldassare offers a number of recommendations for improving the process and inclusiveness of California's democracy. All the reforms he suggests involve the active participation of elected representatives, which he sees as an essential ingredient in overcoming the public's distrust of its political leaders. He concludes that the idea of reform-from-within—leading to a government that lives up to the public's expectations of responsiveness, efficiency, and effectiveness—holds the most promise for California. Only this can break the cycle of distrust that places government officials in the unenviable position of lacking the resources needed to tackle problems because the public does not trust them with the power or money to do so. Without the proper resources and authority, further failures and disappointments by state and local governments are inevitable and, in the end, the largest U.S. state will remain woefully unprepared for its challenging future.

This research brief provides an overview of a book by Mark Baldassare, A California State of Mind: The Conflicted Voter in a Changing World (2002, cloth, 240 pp., \$29.95, ISBN 0-520-23648-3). The book, published jointly by the Public Policy Institute of California and the University of California Press, is available in bookstores or may be ordered by phone at (800) 232-5343 [U.S. mainland] or (415) 291-4400 [Canada, Hawaii, overseas] or through the Internet at www.ppic.org. The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.
