

## IS CALIFORNIA TURNING A CORNER?

In recent years the state’s political system has gone through an especially turbulent period. The highly polarized state legislature has been unable to resolve major problems, from the troubled water system to a looming pension challenge, and for several years it could not approve the state budget on schedule. During this period, the PPIC Statewide Survey has charted persistently low trust in government (32% in May 2013) and legislative approval falling to record lows (14% in November 2010). The number of voters declining to register with a major party is at an all-time high, and voter turnout has been sliding relative to other states.

But there are some positive signs. The state is implementing a number of reforms intended to expand voter participation and make California more governable. Moreover, for the past three years, state budgets have passed on time, the deficit has shrunk rapidly, and the electorate’s approval of the legislature has risen to 38 percent. It is not yet clear whether the reforms produced these changes, but the outcomes are an improvement all the same.

## THE STATE IS DEMOCRATIC BUT NOT NECESSARILY LIBERAL

- **California has become a solidly Democratic state.**

For many years, California was reliably, if not strongly, Republican in presidential elections, and voted both Democratic and Republican in statewide contests. Its politics began a dramatic shift in the 1980s, and today it is one of the most Democratic states at all levels of government. This shift has been especially pronounced in the Bay Area and Los Angeles County, where support for Democratic presidential candidates has jumped at least 20 percentage points since the 1970s.

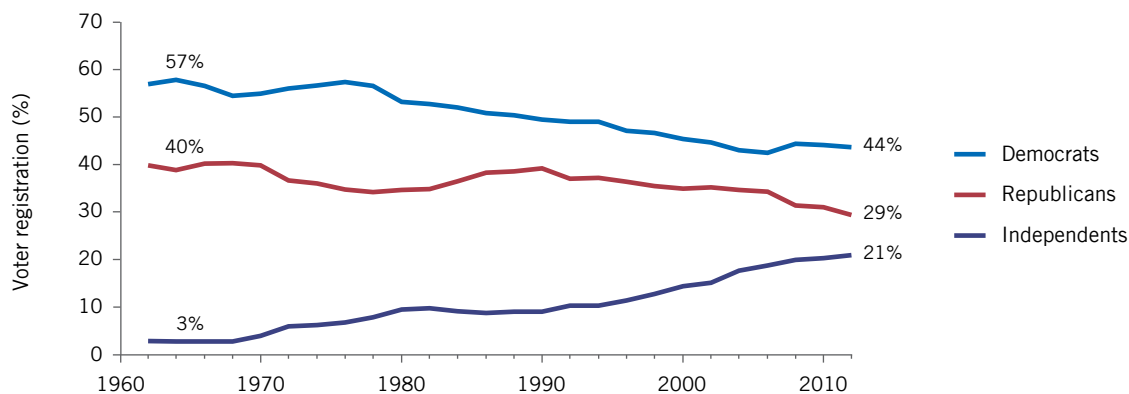
- **Californians are not necessarily liberal.**

While Californians are clearly Democratic, the Bay Area is the only strongly liberal region on both social and fiscal issues. Its residents are more supportive of gay marriage and abortion rights, as well as tax increases to balance the budget, than residents elsewhere. Even Los Angeles County—where Democratic candidates get high levels of support—is only modestly liberal on most issues.

- **Independents are the fastest-growing registration group, but these voters are politically diverse.**

The share of independent (also known as “decline-to-state” or “no party preference”) voters has grown dramatically from just 3 percent of the electorate in the mid-1960s to 21 percent in 2012, while the share of major-party registrants has declined. However, about 60 percent of independents say they lean toward one party and vote reliably that way. In most of the state, these “leaners” are more likely to tilt Democratic than Republican. That helps explain why the state is growing more Democratic even as the number of independent voters has exploded.

### INDEPENDENT REGISTRATION HAS GROWN DRAMATICALLY



SOURCE: California Secretary of State.

## CALIFORNIA'S ELECTORATE LAGS BEHIND OTHER STATES

- **California's voter participation has fallen below the national average.**

As recently as the 1990s, turnout among Californians eligible to vote was higher than the average for the rest of the country. Over the past 15 years, turnout in California has climbed modestly in absolute terms. But its turnout relative to other states has dropped to the point where it matches or falls below the levels elsewhere.

- **The problem lies mostly with voter registration.**

Registered voters in California have turned out at higher rates than the rest of the country throughout this period. But relatively fewer Californians are registering to vote, and California's registration rate is below the national average.

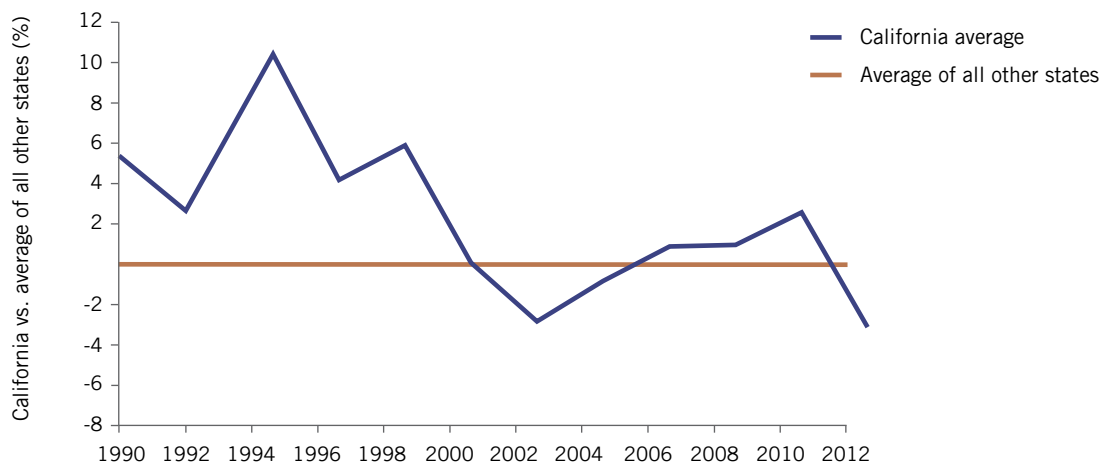
- **California's voters and nonvoters are very different.**

Compared to those who do not vote, California's voters are older, better educated, more rooted in their communities, and more likely to be white. They also tend to hold more conservative views on the size and scope of state government.

- **Recent reforms intended to increase registration may not have much impact.**

California has been experimenting with a number of reforms to increase the registration rate, including a fully online registration process and same-day (also known as "conditional") registration, which allows residents to both register and vote after the official registration deadline has passed. The evidence on the impact of these reforms in California and elsewhere suggests a minimal increase in turnout—4 percentage points at most. Although the number of voters may not increase much, a larger number will probably register late under the same-day registration system.

### CALIFORNIA'S VOTER TURNOUT IS ON THE DECLINE COMPARED WITH OTHER STATES



SOURCE: U.S. Census Current Population Survey.

NOTES: Trend line shows California's turnout rate in general elections relative to the rest of the country.

## CALIFORNIA'S LEGISLATURE IS UNIQUELY POLARIZED

- **California has the most polarized legislature in the country.**

The best evidence to date suggests that California's legislative parties are much farther apart ideologically than in either the U.S. Congress or any other state in the nation. California's partisan divide—the gap between the median Republican and the median Democrat—is far wider than that of the next most polarized states, Arizona and Colorado. This level of polarization has stymied the legislature's efforts to pass key legislation and is at least partly responsible for the institution's low approval ratings.

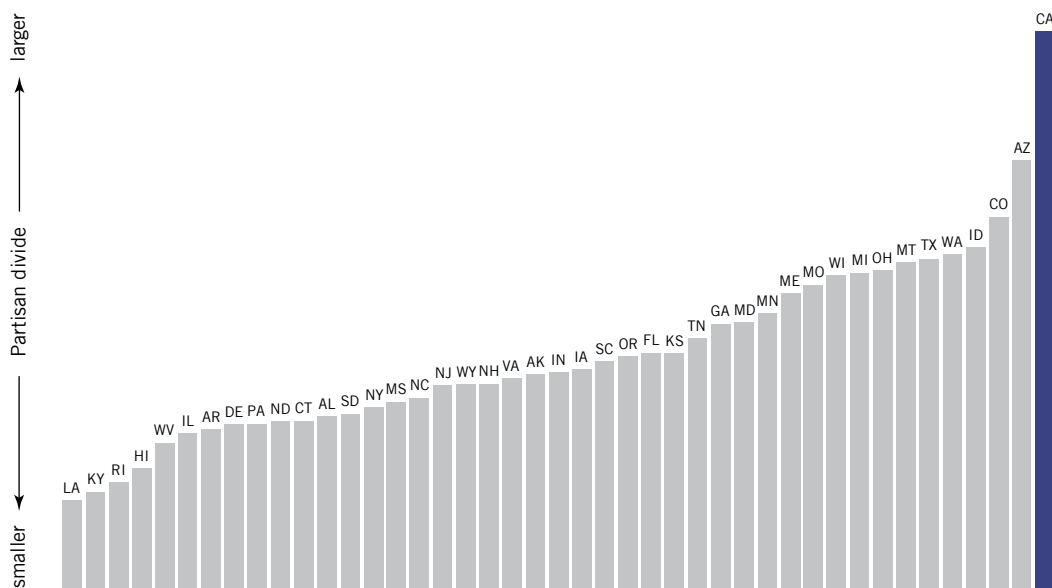
- **There are many possible explanations.**

Until recently, California’s legislative districts were unusually uncompetitive, its legislative term limits unusually stringent, and its initiative process unusually lenient. It was also one of only three states in the country to require a supermajority to pass both tax increases and budgets. The uncompetitive districts might have drawn legislators to the extremes by removing the need to appeal to voters of the other side. Term limits and the initiative process might have reduced the incentive to compromise. By relieving either party of full responsibility for budget decisions, the supermajority requirements probably encouraged legislators to take exaggerated positions.

- **The state is implementing a flurry of reforms to address legislative dysfunction.**

In just the past few years, California has adopted a number of reforms: an independent commission to draw legislative and congressional districts; new, more relaxed legislative term limits; a lower threshold for passing the budget; and a radically open primary system that allows any voter to cast a ballot for any candidate, regardless of party. It is not yet clear whether these changes will narrow the partisan divide. However, the move to a simple majority for passing a budget has already ended the budget stalemates that had become a regular feature of the legislative process in California, though at the cost of excluding Republicans from the process.

## THE CALIFORNIA LEGISLATURE IS THE MOST DIVIDED IN THE NATION



SOURCE: B. Shor and N. McCarty, <http://americanlegislatures.com/data/>.

NOTES: The bar for each state represents the gap between the ideology of the median Republican and the median Democrat, as measured using roll call votes that have been adjusted with responses to Project Vote Smart’s National Political Awareness Test (<http://votesmart.org/about/political-courage-test#.UoEWPSfAbSg>) to place every legislature on a common ideological scale. Estimates are for 2008; they exclude seven states for which data were not available (Massachusetts, Nebraska, New Mexico, Nevada, Oklahoma, Utah, and Vermont). California was far more polarized than any of these seven states in 2006.

## LOOKING AHEAD

California’s political system is at a crossroads. The state is growing more racially and ethnically diverse, and the number of independents has grown tremendously and shows all signs of continuing in that direction. At the same time, California is moving toward the sort of one-party dominance that comes with a risk of lower accountability, at least outside of major decisions. And though approval of the legislature has risen, it remains very low. Given these realities, there are some steps the state might take to foster a robust and representative democracy.

**Make voter registration as simple—and voter outreach as aggressive—as possible.** It is notoriously difficult to increase turnout beyond the group of people who are already inclined to show up. To expand the electorate, California should adopt a default registration system, so that anyone who engages with the government and is qualified to vote is automatically registered to vote. This would remove virtually all barriers to registration and eliminate surges in late registration (which may prove challenging for county registrars under the new same-day registration system). Also needed is an ongoing and aggressive effort to get every voter to the polls in every election, with a special emphasis on those least likely to vote.

**Eliminate differential treatment of independents and party members.** Given current trends, voters who are registered without a party preference will one day be a plurality of the electorate. These voters are already allowed full participation in every congressional and legislative primary election under the state's new top-two primary law. But they should also be granted full access to presidential primaries and internal party decisionmaking. Many of these voters think like partisans already, so the immediate impact would probably be small while the gains to legitimizing the two parties could be great. Without such a change, the number of voters making these decisions will continue to shrink.

**Push decisions to the local level.** Shifting decisionmaking from Sacramento to local governments might be a key part of the effort to reduce polarization and get the legislature working again. Corrections realignment, the new Local Control Funding Formula for schools, and the proposed lower threshold for passing school parcel taxes are three examples of relaxed constraints on local governments. Bringing decisions to the local level might lower the stakes in Sacramento and make voters—who have long expressed a preference for local government in public opinion surveys—happier with the outcomes.

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