

## Has California turned a corner?

For many years, California's highly polarized state legislature was unable to resolve major problems, from the troubled water system to a looming pension challenge. Year after year, lawmakers failed to approve the state budget on schedule. During this period, the legislature's approval ratings descended to record lows, reaching 14 percent in the November 2010 PPIC Statewide Survey. The number of voters declining to register with one of the major parties is now at an all-time high, and turnout has been sliding relative to other states.

But there are positive signs of change. Many of California's recent reforms aim to expand the electorate—in contrast to some other states, where new voter laws have triggered debates about constricting the electorate. Additionally, California's new term limits may offer more stability in the legislature, recent state budgets have passed on time, the deficit has shrunk rapidly, voters have passed a bipartisan water bond, and approval of the legislature has risen to 45 percent in the July 2016 PPIC Statewide Survey. Much of the changing public mood appears to be due to the improving economy. But the reforms may have played a role in making the legislative process more effective.

## The state is Democratic but not necessarily liberal

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

For many years, California voted slightly Republican in statewide elections. But that began to change in the 1980s. Today, California is one of the most Democratic states at all levels of government. This shift to the Democratic Party has been especially pronounced in the Bay Area and Los Angeles County.

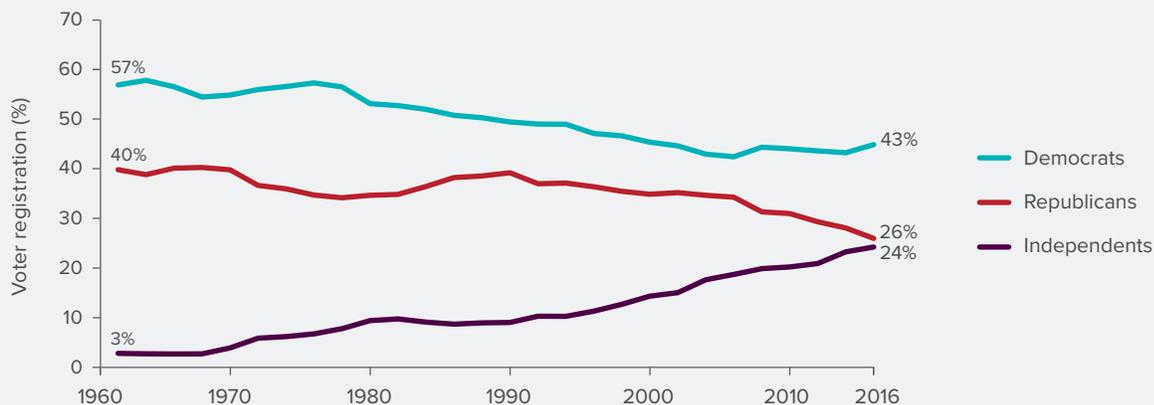
- **Californians are not necessarily liberal.**

While Californians are clearly Democratic, only the Bay Area is strongly liberal on both social issues, such as abortion and gay marriage, and fiscal issues, such as taxes and spending. Even Los Angeles County—with its high levels of support for Democratic candidates—is only modestly liberal on most subjects.

- **Independents are the fastest-growing group of registered voters and are politically diverse.**

The share of voters registering as independents, also known as decline-to-state or no party preference, has grown 20 percentage points since the 1960s, while the share of major-party registrants has declined. However, about 60 percent of independents say they lean toward one party or the other and vote reliably that way. In almost every part of the state, these leaners are more likely to tilt Democratic than Republican.

### INDEPENDENT VOTER REGISTRATION HAS GROWN DRAMATICALLY

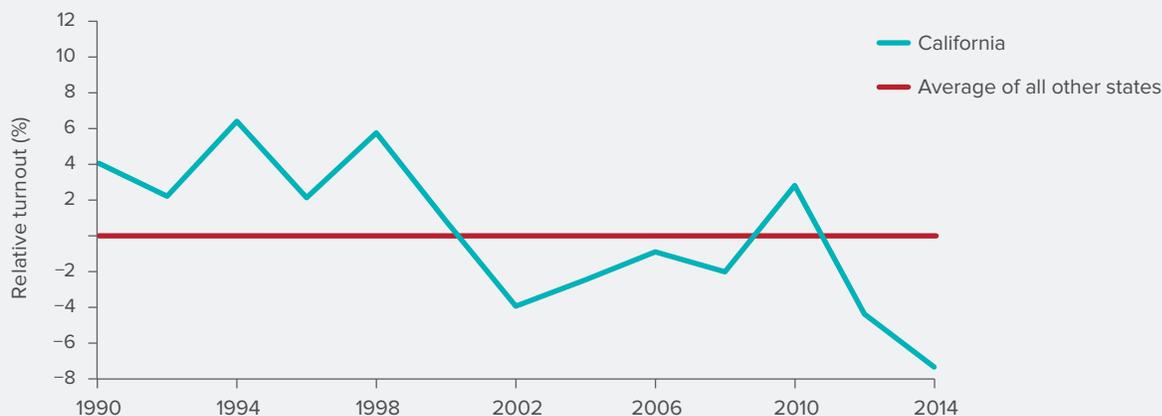


SOURCE: California Secretary of State. Numbers come from the last registration report before each fall statewide election.

## California's electorate lags behind other states

- **California's voter participation has fallen below the national average.**  
As recently as the 1990s, turnout among eligible voters in California was higher than the average for the rest of the country. Over the past 15 years, presidential election turnout in California has actually climbed slightly in absolute terms. But compared to other states, turnout in both presidential and gubernatorial races has dropped to the point that it matches or falls below levels elsewhere.
- **California voters and nonvoters are very different.**  
Compared with those who do not vote, California voters are older, better educated, more rooted in their communities, and disproportionately white. They also tend to hold more conservative views on the size and scope of state government.
- **The below-average turnout stems mostly from lower voter registration.**  
Over the past 25 years, registered voters in California have turned out at higher rates than in the rest of the country. But fewer Californians are registering to vote compared with other states. As a result, California's voter registration rate is below the national average. This is partly because registration is too big a hurdle for some. But it also indicates a lack of engagement among many eligible voters who will not even take the initial step of registering.
- **By themselves, recent reforms intended to increase registration will not solve the turnout problem.**  
California has been experimenting with a number of reforms to increase the registration rate, including a fully online registration process, an automated system that seeks to register by default anyone acquiring or updating a driver's license, and a "conditional" registration system that will allow residents to register and vote after the official registration deadline has passed. Research on these reforms in California and elsewhere suggests registration rates may increase substantially, but aggressive outreach will be required to get these new registrants to cast a ballot.

### CALIFORNIA'S VOTER TURNOUT IS DECLINING COMPARED WITH ALL OTHER STATES



SOURCE: United States Elections Project.

NOTE: Trend line shows California's turnout rate 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 suggests that California's legislative parties are much further apart than in the US Congress or any other state in the nation. California's partisan divide—the gap between the ideology of 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 often stymied efforts to pass key legislation and may have contributed to the legislature's low approval ratings.

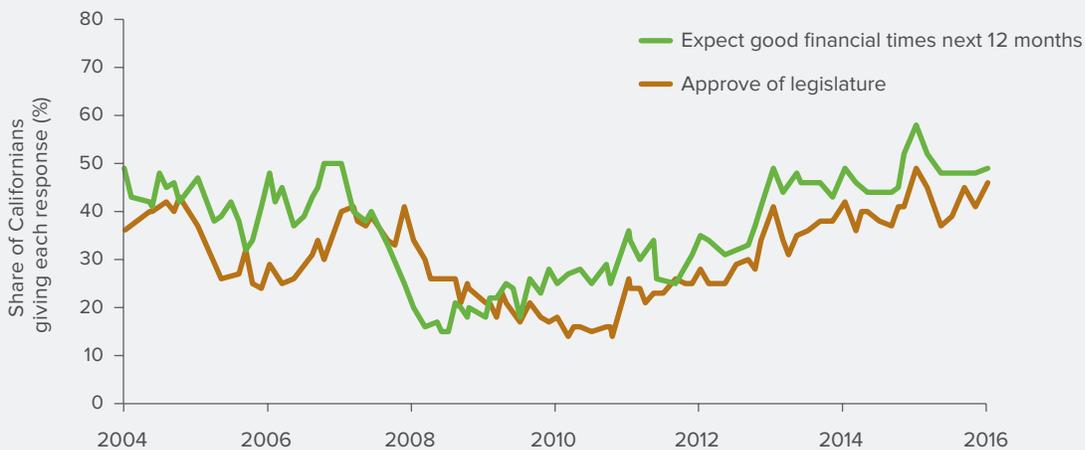
- **The state has passed a flurry of reforms to address legislative dysfunction.**

In the past decade, California has adopted a number of reforms: an independent commission to draw legislative and congressional districts, 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. In the wake of these changes, there are signs that the legislature has become more moderate, though it is unclear yet what role the reforms have played. However, the move to a simple majority for passing a budget has already ended the fiscal stalemates that had been a regular feature of California’s legislative process, albeit at the cost of excluding Republicans from the process.

- **Approval of the legislature has recovered after hitting deep lows.**

Public approval of the legislature hit new lows in the PPIC Statewide Survey during the financial crisis and ensuing fights over state budget cuts. Since then, approval has steadily climbed back to new highs. The improving economy probably accounts for most of this change. Approval of the legislature has long tended to move in sync with views on the economy, and the connection has been especially strong since Jerry Brown became governor in 2011.

### APPROVAL OF LEGISLATURE STRONGLY TIED TO ECONOMY



SOURCE: PPIC Statewide Survey time trends.

NOTES: Question wording for “Expect good financial times next 12 months”: “Turning to economic conditions in California, do you think that during the next 12 months we will have good times financially or bad times?” Question wording for “Approve of legislature”: “Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the way that the California Legislature is handling its job?”

## Looking ahead

California’s political system is at a crossroads. The state is growing more racially and ethnically diverse. The share of independent voters has risen tremendously and will likely continue to grow. At the same time, California is moving toward the sort of one-party dominance that carries a risk of lower accountability, particularly for decisions not in the public spotlight. Given these realities, the state can take steps to foster a robust and representative democracy.

**Make voting as simple—and voter outreach as aggressive—as possible.** It is notoriously difficult to increase turnout beyond the people who are already inclined to show up, but it still makes sense to make it as easy to vote as possible. California has now made the registration process the simplest of almost any state, placing renewed attention on getting registrants to cast a ballot. To facilitate voting, the state has recently permitted counties to use the Colorado model, in which every voter is mailed a ballot and a handful of official vote centers replace traditional polling places. Beyond these reforms, there needs to be an ongoing and aggressive effort to get every voter to take part in every election, with special emphasis on those least likely to participate.

**Eliminate differential treatment of independents and party members.** Voters registered without a party preference are already on track to become a plurality of the electorate, and the new automated registration law will likely greatly accelerate that trend. 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 decision making. Otherwise, the number of voters making these decisions will continue to shrink.

**Push decisions to the local level.** Shifting decision making from Sacramento to local governments might be a key part of the effort to move the state's policies forward in productive ways. Corrections realignment, the new school funding formula, and proposals to lower thresholds for passing school parcel taxes are three examples of new authority for local governments. Surveys have long shown that the public has a preference for local government. Bringing decisions to the local level might lower the stakes in Sacramento and increase public satisfaction with the political process.

## CONTACT A PPIC EXPERT



**Eric McGhee**  
mcghee@ppic.org



**Dean Bonner**  
bonner@ppic.org



**Mark Baldassare**  
baldassare@ppic.org

## READ MORE

- CLIMATE CHANGE
- CORRECTIONS
- ECONOMY
- HEALTH CARE
- HIGHER EDUCATION
- HOUSING
- K-12 EDUCATION
- POLITICAL LANDSCAPE
- POPULATION
- SOCIAL SAFETY NET
- WATER

*This series is funded by the PPIC Corporate Circle and the PPIC Donor Circle.*

The Public Policy Institute of California is dedicated to informing and improving public policy in California through independent, objective, nonpartisan research. We are a public charity. We do not take or support positions on any ballot measure or on any local, state, or federal legislation, nor do we endorse, support, or oppose any political parties or candidates for public office. Research publications reflect the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of our funders or of the staff, officers, advisory councils, or board of directors of the Public Policy Institute of California.

Public Policy Institute of California  
500 Washington Street, Suite 600  
San Francisco, CA 94111  
T 415.291.4400 F 415.291.4401  
**PPIC.ORG**

PPIC Sacramento Center  
Senator Office Building  
1121 L Street, Suite 801  
Sacramento, CA 95814  
T 916.440.1120 F 916.440.1121



**PPIC**

PUBLIC POLICY  
INSTITUTE OF CALIFORNIA