

The Changing Social and Political Landscape of California

California in the mid-21st century is going to be a very different state from the California of today. There is every reason to expect that the state's population—currently about 34 million—will exceed 50 million in the next 30 years or so. The proportion of Californians who are white will steadily decline, while Latinos become the dominant racial and ethnic group. Uneven growth will shift the regional balance of the state away from Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay area toward the Central Valley and Southern California's mega-suburbs. Yet, as California enters an era when it will face some of the toughest challenges in its 150 years of statehood, most of its people have become highly cynical about their elected leaders and many have disengaged themselves from the political process, making public consensus on critical issues more difficult.

In *California in the New Millennium: The Changing Social and Political Landscape*, Mark Baldassare examines three of the most powerful undercurrents altering the character of California—the public's strong and increasing distrust of politicians and the legislative process, the rapidly changing racial and ethnic mix of the state's population, and the growing diversity across its major regions. It is likely that these powerful trends will continue to affect California's politics and public policies for many decades to come.

To gather data for his analysis, Baldassare assembled 12 focus groups and conducted five large statewide public opinion surveys. Participants in the focus groups, which took place throughout the state, were specifically chosen to reflect the regional, racial and ethnic, and political diversity of California. The surveys—conducted during the 1998 California election cycle—interviewed more than 10,000 California residents about their election choices, their policy preferences, and their political, social, and economic opinions.

Political Distrust

The focus group and survey responses clearly indicate that most Californians are disillusioned with their elected officials.

Californians on Political Distrust

"Do you know why fewer people vote? They feel that everything is out of their control, that they have no say—so why bother?"

— Orange County resident

"I don't have any confidence in a politician. The only thing politicians think about from the day they get elected is getting reelected."

— San Diego resident

Californians on Racial and Ethnic Change

"The demographics are changing to the point that there's not going to be any one group as a majority or a minority."

— Sacramento resident

"No matter where you are, there's that racial tension."

— Fresno resident

Californians on Regional Diversity

"If they took the State of California and cut it in half, maybe two states would be easier to govern than one."

— Los Angeles resident

"The problems in California are so different—they should just go to San Luis Obispo and draw a line straight through to Fresno and separate the state."

— San Francisco resident

Source: Focus group sessions, 1998.

They believe that their governments are bloated bureaucracies unable to solve problems, spend taxpayers' money efficiently, or represent the interests and policy preferences of average voters.

The voters have signaled their disdain for political parties and elected representatives in many ways. They have created an open primary process that allows people to vote for any state candidate they choose (regardless of the candidate's party), enacted term limits, chosen—in growing numbers—to register as independents, and relied on a wide array of citizens' initiatives to create new and far-reaching state policies. Indeed, the voters have taken considerable power away from established political institutions—just at a time when California is facing increasingly complex and troublesome policy issues.

This movement away from representative democracy toward direct democracy is not without its perils. Although the survey responses show that voters believe initiatives are better able than elected officials to solve important problems, the surveys also show that voters often find ballot initiatives complicated, confusing, and prone to reflect special interests rather than the concerns of average residents. This has introduced an element of unpredictability into policymaking, because voters often devote only limited attention to very complicated issues and frequently depend on information that comes from biased sources.

Racial and Ethnic Change

Record levels of immigration for more than two decades have transformed California from a state where a vast majority were white to a multiracial society with a large and growing Latino population. The racial and ethnic change under way is having profound effects on the ability to reach consensus on crucial state issues. Divisions over racial and immigration policies have already surfaced in initiatives—Propositions 187 (denying social services to illegal immigrants), 209 (eliminating public affirmative action programs), and 227 (dismantling bilingual education)—creating social tension and conflicts. Another troubling issue is the political nonengagement of the fastest growing and soon-to-be largest ethnic group in California. The low level of political interest and the limited interest in following government affairs revealed in the surveys seriously limit Latinos' chances of shaping the outcome of elections.

Regional Diversity

The vast and different geographies of California have made it difficult for Californians to develop a sense of oneness. As typified by the political battles of the various regions over water, politicians and the public alike have a history of staking out internal competitions and losing track of their common interests. The ongoing regional population changes add further complications, shaping how the political power in the future will be shared among the various regions. Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay area are the traditional political and economic powerhouses, but the Central Valley is now the fastest growing region in the state. The other rapidly growing and changing region consists of the mega-suburbs of Orange County and the Inland Empire (Riverside and San

Bernardino Counties). These regions all differ dramatically in their populations, economy, geography, politics, and public concerns. The policy challenges facing each often have little in common, and the lack of political consensus by elected officials representing these major regions impedes public dialogue at a time when there is a great need to reach a statewide consensus on social, environmental, land use, and infrastructure issues.

The Future of the Golden State

In his concluding chapter, Baldassare arrays the problems that Californians are likely to struggle with during the early decades of the new millennium. He also presents a number of policy recommendations and discusses how they can help reduce some of the public's distrust of government and prepare for the racial and ethnic transformation and increasing regional diversity that lie ahead.

For example, one key to a successful future for California is to have both an informed and an involved citizenry. Today, California has neither. Baldassare argues that public, private, and nonprofit groups throughout the state must stimulate civic dialogue and public engagement to help prepare for the tremendous growth and change expected during the next 30 years. These public policy discussions need to deal with people's real concerns about their everyday lives. The topics of sprawl, traffic, housing, and schools need to be connected with state and local governance issues. Government, business, and nonprofit groups must also give high priority to improving race relations. Politicians will have to recognize the importance of representation by different ethnic and racial groups. If racial and ethnic groups do not feel they have the representation they need, then political alienation and distrust of government will reach new heights in the 21st century. This could have repercussions beyond politics, because the social and economic well-being of the state will depend on the success of the ongoing multiethnic experiment in California.

Baldassare sees California at a critical juncture today, with its social and political landscape changing at the same time that a rapidly growing population is beginning to put incredible pressure on the state's resources, challenging elected officials to respond. How successful California will be in meeting its future is far from certain, but we are at a crucial point in time, Baldassare says, "when thoughtful, tough-minded planning and careful preparation can make a difference."

This research brief provides an overview of a book by Mark Baldassare, California in the New Millennium: The Changing Social and Political Landscape. 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 (800-777-4726) or through the Internet (www.ucpress.edu). 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.

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