

## HAS CALIFORNIA TURNED A CORNER?

In recent times, California's highly polarized state legislature has been unable to resolve major problems, from the troubled water system to a looming pension challenge. For several years it could not approve the state budget on schedule. During this period, approval ratings for the legislature descended to record lows in the PPIC Statewide Survey (14% in November 2010). The number of voters declining to register with one of the major parties has now reached an all-time high, and voter turnout has been sliding relative to other states.

But there are positive signs of change, and the state has been implementing reforms intended to address voter turnout and legislative gridlock. New term limits offer the potential for more stability in the legislature's membership, 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 37 percent (PPIC Statewide Survey, October 2014). It is not yet clear whether the reforms directly 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 leaned Republican in its politics. But that began to change in the 1980s, and 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.

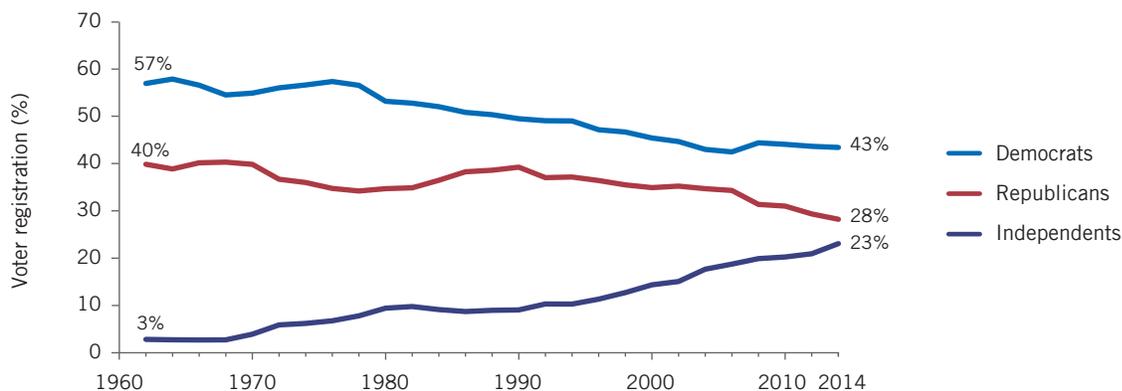
- **Californians are not necessarily liberal.**

While Californians are clearly Democratic, only the Bay Area is strongly liberal on both social (e.g., abortion and gay marriage) and fiscal (e.g., tax and spending) issues. 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 voter registration group, but they 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 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 that of 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.

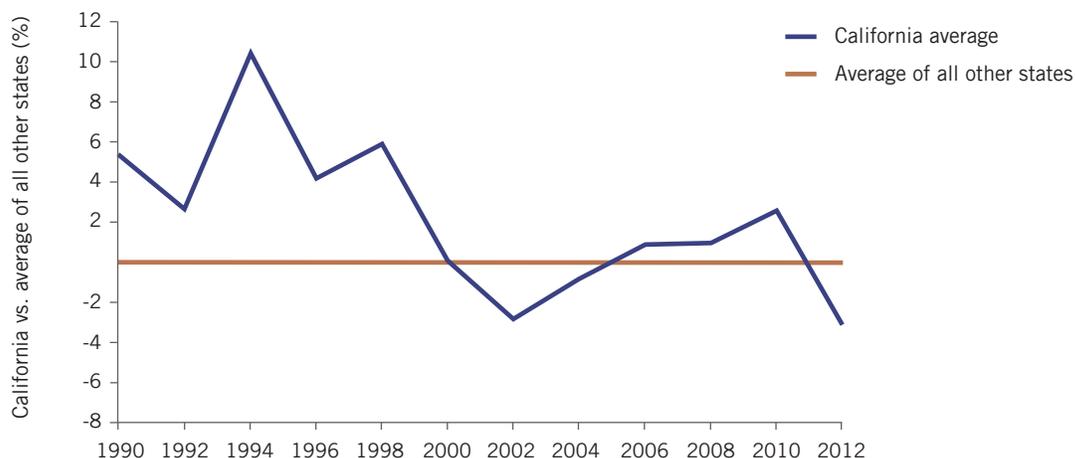
- **California's voters and nonvoters are very different.**

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 registration—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 TO OTHER STATES



SOURCE: U.S. Census Current Population Survey.

NOTES: Trend line shows California's turnout rate relative to the rest of the country. Data for 2014 were not available at the time of publication.

## 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 than in the U.S. 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 stymied the legislature's efforts to pass key legislation and has been at least partly responsible for the institution's low approval ratings.

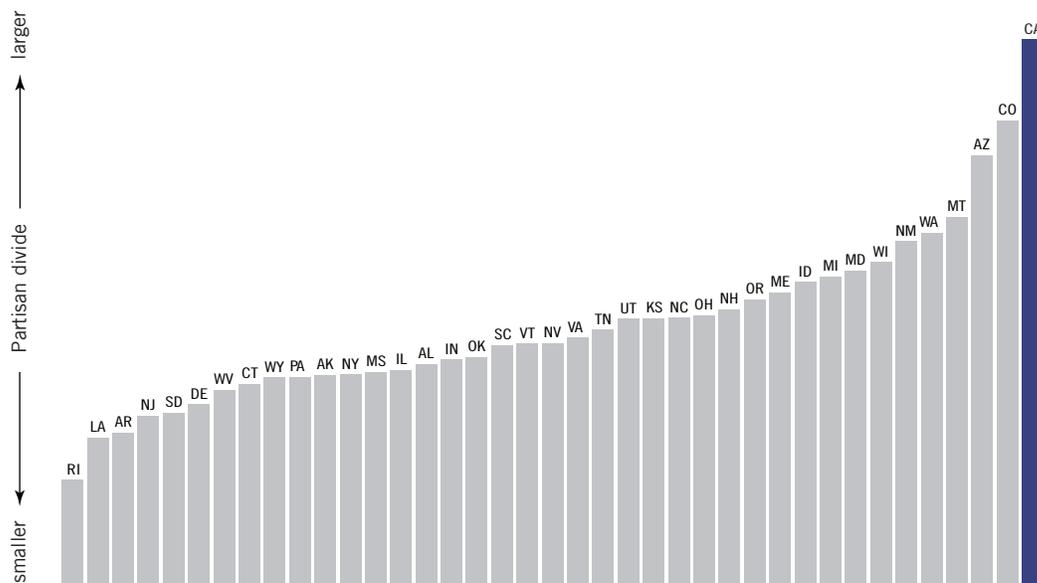
- **There are many possible explanations.**

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: Boris Shor and Nolan McCarty, “Measuring American Legislatures” ( <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 Political Courage Test ( <http://votesmart.org/about/political-courage-test#.UoEWPSfAbSg>) to place every legislature on a common ideological scale. Estimates are for 2013; they exclude eleven states for which data were not available (Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Iowa, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Texas). California was far more polarized than any of these eleven states in 2006, when data were last available.

## 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 and the long-term gains for 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 school funding formula, 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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