

California is charting its own political course

In the past year, California—a frequent challenger of federal policies in the past—has opposed many of the Trump administration’s policies, both in court and through state-level action. The PPIC Statewide Survey has found that Californians, who tend to have different policy preferences than adults nationwide, continue to be supportive of the state acting on its own in many areas—from climate change to immigration to health care.

Unlike many other states, California recently implemented reforms aimed at expanding its electorate. Other recent reforms—a new redistricting commission, a radically open “top two” primary, and a relaxation of term limits—may be having a moderating effect in the state legislature. However, the state legislature is still polarized, and California has been moving toward the sort of one-party dominance that carries a risk of lower accountability, particularly for decisions not in the public spotlight. And, although making registration and voting easier is an important step, it will take aggressive outreach to get more people to the polls.

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 San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles County.

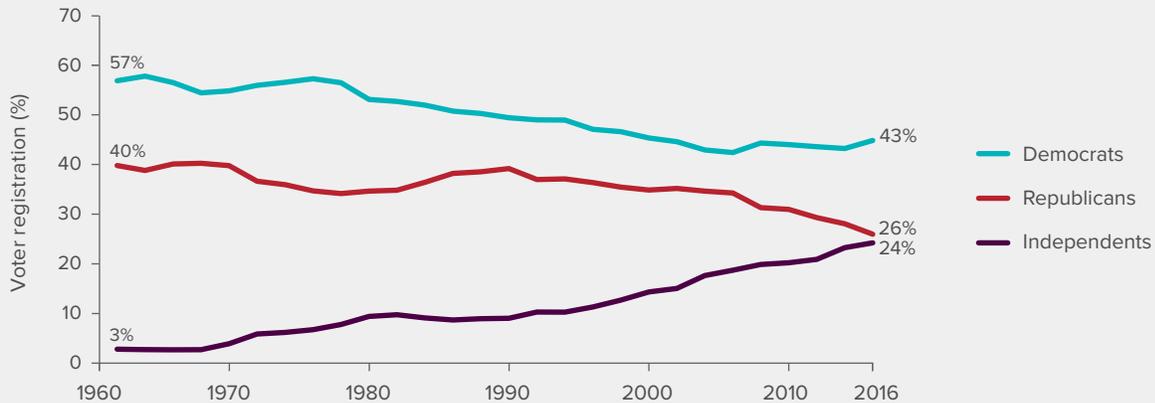
- **Californians are not necessarily liberal.**

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 in most areas.

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

The share of voters registered 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.

- **Most Californians support state action on climate change, immigration, and health care.**

A solid majority of Californians (66% in July 2017) support policies to address global warming independent of the federal government; majorities have supported state action since 2005. Similarly, two in three Californians (65% in January 2017) favor independent state action to protect the legal rights of undocumented immigrants; a strong, bipartisan majority (78% in September 2017) also favor the federal DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) program. Two in three Californians (65%) favor a state single-payer health insurance program (May 2017). And, as Republicans in Congress were attempting to repeal the Affordable Care Act, favorable opinions of the 2010 reform reached record highs in California: 58 percent held generally favorable opinions in September 2017. By contrast, fewer than half of adults nationwide held favorable views (46% favorable, 44% unfavorable), according to a recent Kaiser Family Foundation poll.

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 are more likely than nonvoters to be older, better educated, and white.**

Compared with Californians who do not vote, California voters are older, more affluent, better educated, more likely to own homes and to have been born in the United States, and disproportionately white. They also tend to hold more conservative views on the size and scope of state government.

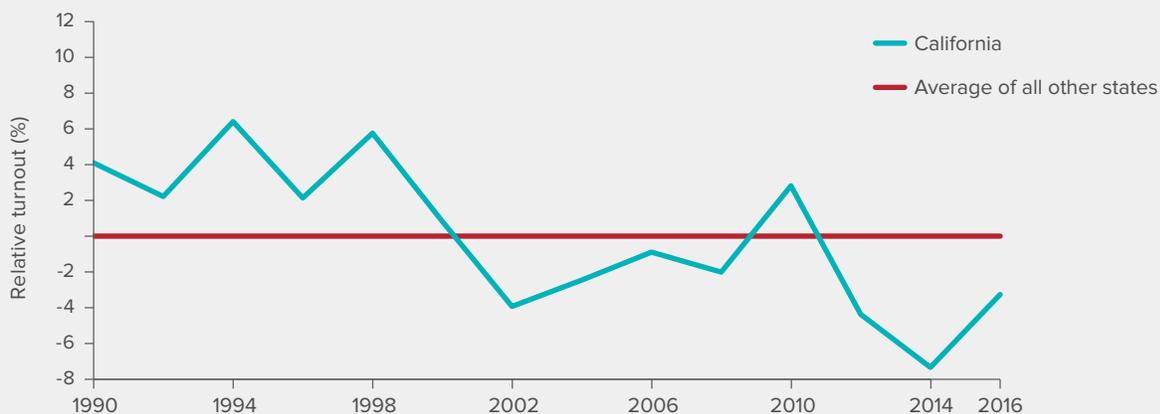
- **The below-average turnout stems mostly from lower voter registration ...**

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 reflects a lack of engagement among California's Latino and Asian American communities in particular. As these communities grow to be a larger share of the voting-eligible electorate, their lower registration rates pull down the overall registration levels in the state.

- **... but increasing voter registration will not single-handedly 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 remains unusually polarized

- **California has one of the most polarized legislatures in the country.**

The best evidence, from the Measuring American Legislatures project, suggests that the legislative parties are much further apart in California than in the US Congress or in most other states. The only state with a wider gap is Colorado, where legislative polarization has been increasing rapidly in recent years. California's polarization has often stymied efforts to pass key legislation—especially state budgets—when a higher threshold for passage required a bipartisan coalition.

- **The state recently implemented 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; a relaxation of legislative term limits; a lower vote threshold for budget passage; and an 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 Democratic legislative caucus has become more moderate. The redistricting, term limit, and primary reforms appear to have contributed roughly equally to this change. The move to a simple majority for budget passage has ended the fiscal stalemates that had become a regular feature of California's legislative process, at the cost of what amounts to the exclusion of Republicans from the process.

- **Approval of the legislature has recovered.**

Public approval of the legislature hit new lows during the Great Recession, as state leaders fought over budget cuts. Since 2010, approval has climbed steadily and reached 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 is growing more racially and ethnically diverse. The share of independent voters has risen tremendously and will probably continue to grow. California will probably continue to pursue its own goals in many policy areas, leading to more friction between the state and the federal government. At the same time, one-party dominance carries a risk of lower accountability, particularly for decisions made behind the scenes. Given these realities, the state should 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 may 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.

Maintain a relatively decentralized governance structure. Under Governor Brown, state policy has shifted decision making to the local level: corrections realignment, the new school funding formula, and proposals to lower thresholds for passing school parcel taxes are three examples. Surveys have long shown that the public has a preference for local government. Bringing decisions to the local level might continue to lower the stakes in Sacramento and increase public satisfaction with the political process. This could be especially important now that the state government is arguably growing more powerful and influential as it becomes a focal point of resistance to Trump administration policies. Maintaining some level of decentralization can encourage parts of the state that disagree with the dominant Democratic Party perspective to feel invested in the state's political system.

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