

# EDITOR'S NOTE

## BLUEPRINT

A magazine of research, policy, Los Angeles and California

**THE TITLE AND THEME** of this issue of Blueprint — our 15th, for those keeping score — comes from a classic work of journalism and political science, Vincent Cannato’s *The Ungovernable City*, which chronicles the struggles of Mayor John Lindsay to arrest the declining fortunes of New York City in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Cannato’s examination found Lindsay sorely lacking and New York spinning away from all attempts to exert control over its fate and future.

We approach California somewhat differently, beginning with the title. Note the addition of the question mark, as in: “The Ungovernable State?” It is there because, while Cannato’s verdict on New York was firm and depressing — and, arguably, incorrect, in light of New York’s later rebound to prosperity — views of California’s governability tend to waver depending upon who’s in charge.

When Arnold Schwarzenegger was governor in the 2000s, it was fashionable to suggest that California was lost. Schwarzenegger came to office amidst an energy crisis that felled Gray Davis. Faring only a little better, Schwarzenegger governed the state during a recession and more than one budget crisis, which caused some to compare California to Greece among the world’s “failed states.”

Such talk subsided after Jerry Brown returned to office for his second gubernatorial stint, beginning in 2011. Brown, who succeeded Ronald Reagan in 1975 (meaning that Brown came to office not once but twice on the heels of an actor), brought with him a commitment to frugality. Aided by a rebound in the economy and success in convincing voters to tax themselves, he restored the state’s fiscal stability. By the time he left office in 2019, there weren’t many still arguing that California was beyond governance.



**JIM NEWTON**

Editor-in-chief, Blueprint

Now, three years later, the state is weathering the effects of COVID and its ruinous pounding on the economy. There are clear signs of improvement — California’s job growth leads the nation, and Los Angeles’ job growth leads California. But there are also deep wells of worry: rampant homelessness, staggering inequality, skyrocketing housing costs.

This seems, then, an appropriate time to plumb some of the core questions of California’s governance. Does democracy here work? The failed recall of Gov. Gavin Newsom left no one happy, but does that mean the system is broken, or just that it was tested? Is voting here fair? Are emerging communities finding their way into the political process, or are they being excluded? More concretely, is the government able to protect its people — from crime, on one hand, and from abusive policing, on the other? Is California headed in the direction of safety and harmony, or is it trending away from both?

That is what this issue of Blueprint seeks to examine. We have set out less to answer the question of California’s governability and more to raise it as a challenge to the state and its leadership. In the end, California is governed because it has to be. Whether it is governed successfully, in such a way as to protect its people from harm, shelter them and allow them to prosper — this is the challenge California needs to address.

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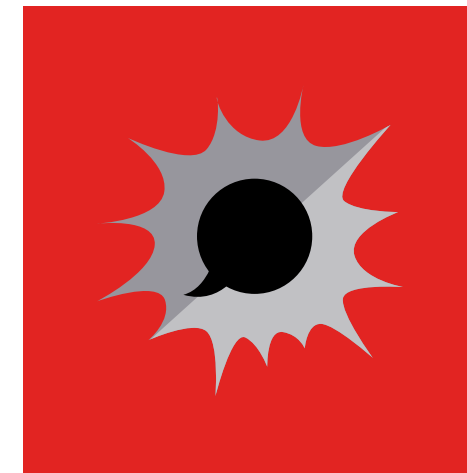
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LEARN FROM SAN FRANCISCO

FIRST PERSON  
SAN FRANCISCO RECALL:  
A PARENT’S VIEW

*While pundits looked for trends, parents thought about their kids*

AT FIRST, THE COMMENTS FROM THE PUBLIC at the March meeting of the San Francisco school board were staid. Several students pleaded to make International Women’s Day a SFUSD holiday, several teachers complained about a payroll glitch that left hundreds of them short on their monthly bills, and both teachers and students made a passionate demand to continue funding for the Peer Resources program at Lincoln High.

Then, things took a turn. “I want to thank board members Collins, López, and Moliga for their service, and I’m sad that we’re losing these equity advocates,” the final speaker said. Then, he added: “Their opponents and those who stand against Black and Brown students should go fuck themselves!”

Alison Collins, Gabriela López, and Faauuga Moliga, the three San Francisco school board members recently ousted in a closely watched recall election, were not present for that expression of support. They had been removed from office by voters, and they were soon replaced by appointees of San Francisco Mayor London Breed.

They were casualties of the first successful recall in San Francisco in more than 100 years. Backed by Mayor Breed and big money from Silicon Valley, the recall represented a battle in the nation’s convoluted culture wars, but because it happened in San Francisco, it attracted national attention, much of it predictable — and wrong.

Pundits on Fox News trumpeted it as a backlash against “woke politics” and a bellwether for “progressivism gone wild.” Observers noted the galvanized response of the Asian American community in a city where its voting strength had long been underestimated, “a sleeping tiger, poked.”

But what unfolded in San Francisco was not a referendum on “wokeness” or a test of political demographics. It was an exercise in local politics, complicated and messy and decidedly rooted in the particulars of this city fighting its way through COVID-19.

The morning of the election, after I finished my volunteer shift helping kids out of their parents’ cars at the SFUSD elementary school where my daughter is a third grader, I walked a block to my polling place in a neighbor’s garage. I happened to know one of the poll workers — another neighborhood public school parent. Before the pandemic, Sujung Kim’s daughter used to babysit my daughter. We chatted about our kids, and then I cast my ballot — along with a mere quarter of registered San Francisco voters that day — and got my sticker.

I voted no on the recall mainly because I don’t like recalls, and the school board was up for reelection in November anyway. Still, some of the grievances that mobilized supporters of the recall resonated with me.



The year and a half of remote learning through the pandemic was bumpy at best — there seemed to have been little planning for a transition to virtual classrooms and a belabored process for getting kids back in real classrooms. I agree with those who want my kid’s school renamed not to honor an enslaver, never mind that his poem became the national anthem. But pushing ahead with the renaming of 44 schools in a city full of empty classrooms during the pandemic seemed to many like a distraction.

In the weeks leading up to the recall and the months following, the conversations I’ve had with other public school parents have run the gamut, from “throw the bums out” rage to furrowed-brow confusion. One friend

“What can happen when voters confront the powerful pull of binary thinking and discomfort with complexity?”

who works for the city of San Francisco talked of her experience working with elected officials committed to equity, whose progress is deliberate and incremental and reflective of the spectrum of community stakeholders — slow and steady. This school board was not that. Another friend saw the recall as a disappointing reflection of the powerful pull of binary thinking, evidence that a substantial number of voters in San Francisco are uncomfortable with the dynamic complexity of the post-George Floyd era of social change.

Sujung, like me, voted no on the recall. She too was skeptical of recalls and their potential to subvert the political process. But we also shared concerns. “Online learning

ILLUSTRATION BY NOMA BAR

was a disaster,” she told me. “They dragged their feet on getting schools prepared to bring kids back, and they freaking failed us.” Her son is finishing his junior year, and her daughter, now in college, endured the tail end of her Lowell High School junior year and then senior year on Zoom.

Lowell is the San Francisco high school that for decades had a “merit-based” testing admissions process that the school board shifted to a lottery — like every other school in the city except for the Ruth Asawa School of the Arts. Her daughter is a product of that “merit-based” Lowell system, but Sujung believes the lottery is a big step toward equity. “Sure, it’s nice to have this shiny school, but it’s not fair,” she said. “For students of color from low-income backgrounds, they’ve written them off, and it doesn’t have to be that way.”

Sujung moved to San Francisco 31 years ago and says she sees big changes in the city over those decades — more stratified, more conservative and less diverse. The pandemic left a lot of parents depleted and frustrated, she told me, and they took that out on the school board.

The week that Mayor Breed named three new school board members I took a walking tour of the Jackson Square Historic District and Chinatown’s Portsmouth Square, led by Gary Kamiya, a local historian and San Francisco Chronicle columnist. In the shadow of the Transamerica Pyramid, I heard tales of racial strife and power shifts dating back 200 years. I watched a swaggering young white dude in a Bitcoin hoodie exit a sleek, frosted-glass office next to what was a Gold Rush-era cigar factory run on Chinese labor.

“It’s complicated,” said Kamiya when I asked for his thoughts on the recall. Yes, he said, San Francisco may be considering the outer edges of wokeness, but the underlying questions of race and schools are reliable sources of conflict in San Francisco. “We’ve been down this road before. If you look at the history of public schools in this city, there’s been this collision between Asian Americans, Black Americans, and activists that goes back 40 to 50 years. I’d be wary to read too much into things.”

— Zachary Slobig

PHOTO BY DANIEL / PEXELS

FIRST PERSON  
A DAY AT THE RACES

*Teaching the kids to gamble*

THE 2018 KENTUCKY DERBY presented a dilemma: What’s known as “the most exciting two minutes in sports” was taking place on the afternoon of my 11-year-old’s birthday party, and I wanted to watch the race.

Believing that when life hands you lemons, you make a gambling opportunity, I called all 10 kids into the living room and slapped \$10 on the coffee table. I instructed each of them to pick two horses in the 20-thoroughbred field, and the winner would get the cash. Five minutes later, children who had never watched a horse race were screaming at the TV screen. I’ll never forget sweet, red-haired Maggie wearing a fiery expression and yelling “Go, Free Drop Billllllllly!” But a horse named Justify crossed the wire first, and it was Meha who crowed as she pocketed the \$10.

“I’m no grizzled gambler ... I know just enough to be stupid.”

I enjoy horse racing and adore an afternoon at the track, particularly if it’s Santa Anita Park, with the San Gabriel Mountains majestic in the background. My father took me to the Laurel Park race course in Maryland when I was young, and I have done the same with my kids, pairing an afternoon of equine entertainment and ice cream cones with instructions on parimutuel betting. I give each youngster \$2 a race to wager, often with surprising results. When we visited Santa Anita before the pandemic, my oldest perused the Daily Racing Form, seeking to decipher the hieroglyphics of split times and weight allowances, and picked near favorites, hoping to make a slight profit.

My youngest, however, would throw his \$2 on the long shot every race.

I tried to reason with him. “The horse has 50-to-1 odds,” I said. “He’ll probably come in last.”

To which my son countered, “But if he wins, I get \$100.”

And, well, that was not wrong.

TO BE CLEAR, I’m no grizzled gambler. The track is only about a once-a-year occurrence for us, and I know just enough to be stupid. I’ll read the Racing Form, searching for a horse with high odds who ran strong recently, or who has dropped in class seeking easier competition. I regularly skip simple bets in favor of trying to peg exotics with bigger payouts, combining my wagers in a trifecta box to nail the exact first, second and third place finishers.

It’s probably clear, but when someone asks how I did, I usually shake my head and mutter, “Bad day at the track.”

This is relative. I’m too wimpy to really put much at risk. I rarely bet more than \$10 a race, or lose more than \$50 in an afternoon. It’s the price of entertainment for a few hours, more than a movie but much less than Disneyland, and we get the thrill of watching awe-inspiring animals.

ABOUT THOSE ANIMALS: I understand that some people think horse racing is barbaric, that forcing horses to sprint for a mile on thin legs for the entertainment of gamblers borders on, or even constitutes, animal abuse. Add in the heartbreaking deaths: Medina Spirit, who won last year’s Kentucky Derby and then failed a post-race drug test, died of an apparent heart attack while training at Santa Anita in December. This followed the 2018-19 racing season, when 37 horses died just at that track. No clear reason for the fatalities was ever identified.

Horse deaths at Santa Anita have decreased since then, but they do continue. Some people won’t ever watch a race again. I can’t argue with their view.

Maybe that is partly why, on a gorgeous Saturday in February, Santa Anita feels like a ghost town, about 25% as crowded as before the pandemic. Many of the once-bustling food spots are closed, and lines are short at the betting windows. I don’t know if this is because of changing attitudes, lingering COVID concerns, the rise of gambling by phone and computer or something else.

Still, the day is wonderful. Before each race, my son and I watch the horses in the warm-up area, the tote board with betting odds in the distance. We arrive just before Race Three, 6 ½ furlongs for fillies and mares, and I tell my son that almost no one is betting on No. 4, Ever Smart, and that her odds are 22-to-1.

“I feel bad for Ever Smart. I’ll bet on her,” he says, and when I say there’s a reason Ever Smart is the long shot, he doesn’t want to hear it.

We walk to the window and place the bet. A few minutes later, somehow, Ever Smart hits the tape first. Her odds have dropped, but my son’s \$2 blossoms into \$31.40. He beams knowingly.

It’s a good day at the track.

— Jon Regardie





# ABORTION SANCTUARY

With *Roe v. Wade* in danger, California prepares to protect.

AS MUCH OF THE COUNTRY BRACES for the possibility that the United States Supreme Court will soon move to eliminate constitutional protections for abortion, many states are poised to gut or curtail those rights. California, by stark contrast, is positioning itself to become a haven for those barred or restricted elsewhere — and UCLA is central to that effort.

If the court overturns *Roe v. Wade* — and the leak in early May of a draft opinion strongly suggests that it’s about to — the ruling could remove any constitutional right to abortion, which now protects women who seek to end their pregnancies before fetal viability, about 23 weeks. At least 20 states are prepared, given that opening,

to immediately impose bans or severely restrictive abortion laws. Since many of the states poised to enact such restrictions are in the South and West, California would become the closest state with access to abortion care within driving distance for about 1.4 million non-California residents, according to estimates by Guttmacher Institute, a research organization in favor of abortion rights.

California lawmakers and reproductive rights advocates have been preparing for this possibility since 2016. Legislative leaders and dozens of other stakeholders in December recommended 45 changes — legislative, administrative and executive — to expand and improve abortion access and increase numbers of providers as other states move to outlaw abortion. Lawmakers also introduced eight bills into the 2022 legislative session to help secure the state’s “leadership role as a national beacon for reproductive freedom,” according to the California Legislative Women’s Caucus, a bipartisan group of female legislators advocating on behalf of women, children and families.

UCLA School of Law is part of the state’s plan and has been given a \$5 million grant to create a reproductive rights institute. The new Institute on Reproductive Health, Law & Policy would be a kind of think tank to protect, expand and advance a right most Americans have come to know as an unquestionable part of their reproductive autonomy for nearly a half-century. Its sudden reversal would be a shock and a blow, particularly to millions of young women and families.

“The governor and Legislature have been incredibly serious about making California a haven for people across the state who need abortion care and, moving forward, to provide reproductive care for people outside the state,” said Bradley Sears, associate dean of public interest law in UCLA’s law school. “But it is not just a defensive posture. The state is really investing — even for people in California for whom cost might be a barrier.”

The new reproductive institute will use a cross-disciplinary approach to reproductive rights, health care and justice, said Cary Franklin, acting faculty director of the institute. “One of the most important things we will do is train policymakers, scholars and lawyers who may want to work in reproductive rights to produce more strategies to preserve reproductive rights. My hope is for this institute to be a leader for what the future will look like.”

The institute will collaborate with the medical school, the schools of public policy and public health and other campus centers.

It has five goals: training law students to work on reproductive rights through litigation, policy and other advocacy strategies; educating judges, legislators, nonprofit leaders and health care providers; suggesting new paths by bringing reproductive rights scholars and advocates together to brainstorm; publishing research that affects current debates about reproductive rights and health; and emphasizing the importance of reproductive freedom by telling the stories of those whose lives are affected by it.

In some cases, the most urgent need is to correct misinformation, such as the false impression that abortion is a dangerous procedure. Today, deceptive crisis pregnancy centers, which spread lies in order to dissuade women from obtaining abortions, significantly outnumber abortion care clinics in California, according to a 2021 California Women’s Law Center (CWLC) report. Some are deliberately placed next to Planned Parenthood clinics and share a parking lot. These centers are located mostly in low-income communities of predominantly people of color. The majority offer no medical care from licensed professionals but receive state and federal funds for services, the report notes. They use false medical claims about abortion

and pregnancy, targeting people of color and low-income people seeking abortions with misleading claims about services they offer. The CWLC has advocated barring state funding to these centers.

Pregnancy crisis centers underscore how abortion barriers often have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable people seeking reproductive care. Those are precisely the people that UCLA and California are setting out to protect, said Franklin, who teaches reproductive law. “There is a lot of thinking about how to help people who are arriving across the country to our state.”

— Kathleen Kelleher

## “A LIGHTER LOOK” — OFFICIAL HUMOR

Rick Meyer’s regularly appearing column takes a lighter look at politics and public affairs around the world. This month: White House clowns.

GEORGE WASHINGTON WAS NOT ESPECIALLY FUNNY.

But he endorsed good humor. “It is assuredly better,” he wrote to a fellow Virginian, “to go laughing [rather] than crying thro’ the rough journey of life.”

His successor, John Adams, was better at making people chuckle. “In my many years,” Adams liked to say, “I have come to a conclusion that one useless man is a shame, two is a law firm, and three or more is a congress.”

Often when presidents make us laugh, we laugh at them, not with them. But sometimes they try to be funny. Occasionally their jokes work. Other times they don’t. For these words of humor from White House clowns, we are indebted to the *Washington Post*, *Reader’s Digest* and the *Journal of the American Revolution*.

Thomas Jefferson, whose personal version of the Bible deleted many mentions of the supernatural, said of John Adams: “He is as disinterested as the being who made him.”

Abraham Lincoln was not above poking fun at himself. “If I were two-faced,” he told critics, “would I be wearing this one?”

His successor, Andrew Johnson, voiced a lament that many people today understand. Washington, D.C., he said, is a city “bordered by reality.”

For Theodore Roosevelt, little hope was to be found in Congress. “When they call the roll in the Senate,” he said, “the senators do not know whether to answer ‘present’ or ‘guilty.’”

Struggles between liberals and conservatives

“An atheist is a guy who watches a Notre Dame-SMU football game and doesn’t care who wins.” — Dwight Eisenhower

are hardly new. Woodrow Wilson described conservatives this way: “A conservative is someone who makes no changes and consults his grandmother when in doubt.”

A taciturn New Englander, Calvin Coolidge had little to say about anything. At dinner one evening, a woman seated next to him said she had made a bet that she could get at least three words out of him.

“You lose,” he said.

Like Woodrow Wilson, Eleanor Roosevelt championed some liberal causes. One day, FDR was told in jest that she was in prison.

“I’m not surprised,” he said. “But what for?”

Harry S. Truman was born in Missouri and grew up on farms. He spoke one day at a Grange meeting and used the word “manure.”

A friend turned to his wife, Bess, and said, “I wish you could get Harry to use a more genteel word.”

“Good Lord, Helen,” Bess replied. “It’s taken me years to get him to say ‘manure.’ ”

Her admonition didn’t stick.

Not long afterward, HST gave some life advice: “Never kick a fresh turd on a hot day.”

Dwight Eisenhower offered a bit of theology. “An atheist,” he said, “is a guy who watches a Notre Dame-SMU football game and doesn’t care who wins.”

Just like Lincoln, John Kennedy could be self-deprecating. One day, a little boy asked him how he became a war hero.

“It was absolutely involuntary,” Kennedy said. “They sank my boat.”

When he appointed his brother attorney general, he took criticism for nepotism.

“I don’t see anything wrong,” he said, “with giving Bobby a little legal experience before he goes out on his own to practice law.”

Lyndon Johnson made Truman sound like a choir boy.

LBJ asked economist John Kenneth Galbraith: “Did you ever think that making a speech on economics is a lot like pissing down your leg? It seems hot to you, but it never does to anyone else.”

Jimmy Carter, like Washington, was not a naturally funny person.

He scored, though, after he had been president for a while.

“My esteem in this country has gone up substantially,” he said. “It is very nice now when people wave at me. They use all their fingers.”

Humor came more instinctively to his successor, Ronald Reagan.

“Politics is supposed to be the second-oldest

profession,” Reagan liked to say. “I have come to realize that it bears a very close resemblance to the first.”

He told antiwar protesters at UCLA: “‘Make love, not war?’ You don’t look like you could do much of either.”

Reagan was able to wisecrack under pressure. When he was shot in an assassination attempt, a bullet broke a rib, punctured a lung and caused serious internal bleeding.

As surgeons surrounded him, he looked up and said:

“Please tell me you’re Republicans.”

To Bill Clinton, eight years in the White House were not entirely a joke. “I don’t know whether it’s the finest public housing in America or the crown jewel of the American penal system.”

Barack Obama learned to be careful with humor. He told a White House Correspondents Association dinner: “Some folks don’t think I spend enough time with Congress. ‘Why don’t you get a drink with Mitch McConnell?’ they ask.

“Really? Why don’t you get a drink with Mitch McConnell?”

McConnell tweeted a picture of himself having a beer next to an empty barstool.

The president came off as mean.

Obama discovered more about the unintended consequences of humor from citing proof of his birth in Hawaii and telling the correspondents:

“No one is happier, no one is prouder to put this birth certificate matter to rest than the Donald. That’s because he can finally get back to focusing on the issues that matter, like: Did we fake the moon landing?”

Donald Trump was in the audience. He had been claiming that Obama should not be in the White House because he was not born in the United States. Some say it was this humiliation by Obama that goaded him into running for president.

Reagan learned that presidential humor might even be dangerous.

One day he did a sound check for a radio program. “My fellow Americans,” he said, “I’m pleased to tell you today that I’ve signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes.”

He didn’t know the microphone was live.

*The Last Laugh:*  
“The trouble with practical jokes is that they very often get elected.”  
— Will Rogers

— Richard E. Meyer

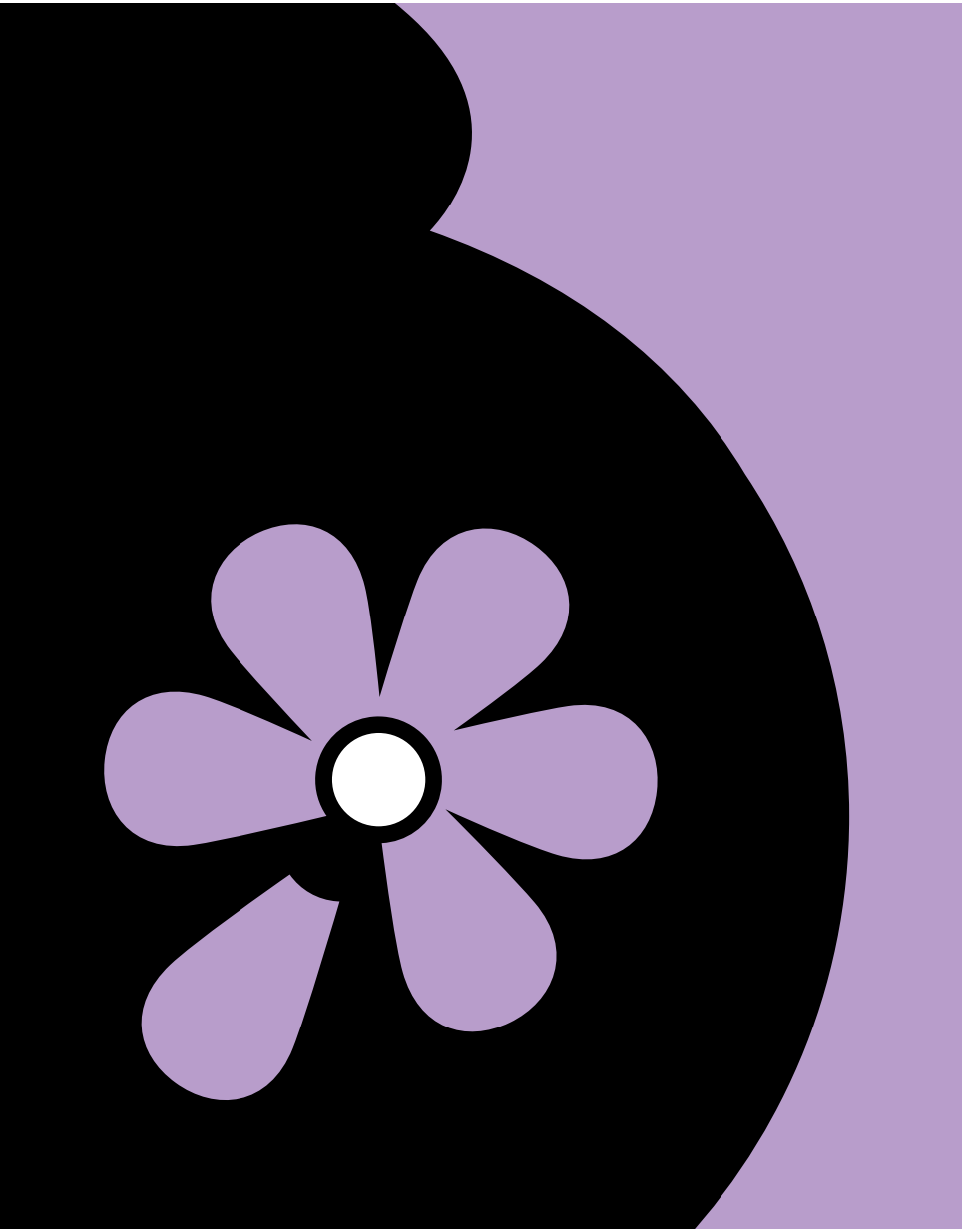


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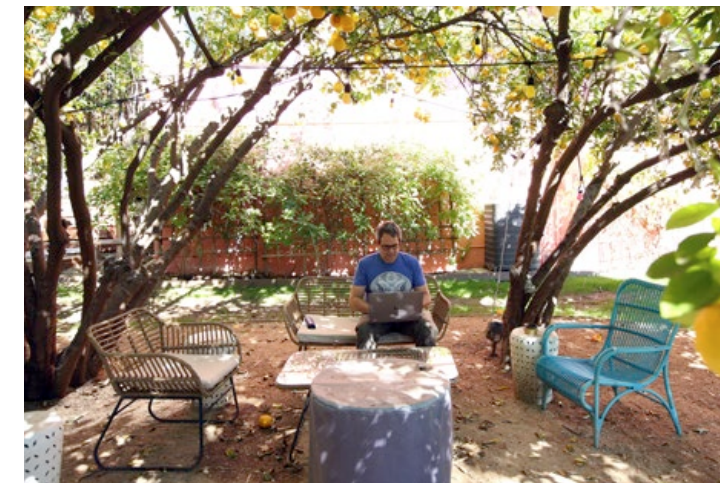




# In Defense of Democracy

Writer-turned-activist Jason Berlin Takes on Voter Suppression

WRITTEN BY  
**MOLLY SELVIN**  
PHOTOS BY  
**IRIS SCHNEIDER**



ABOVE: JASON BERLIN'S LEMON-TREE CANOPY IN MOUNT WASHINGTON. OPPOSITE PAGE: BERLIN WAS RATTLED BY THE ELECTION OF DONALD TRUMP. HE RESPONDED BY DEVOTING HIMSELF TO VOTER REGISTRATION.

**THE TREE BRANCHES HANGING OVER JASON BERLIN'S GARDEN**, all in a tangle, are an appropriate metaphor for someone who upended his life five years ago.

A former writer of comedy and reality television, Berlin is now executive director of Field Team Six, which he founded. His mission: to register Democrats and prod them to cast ballots in the face of Republican efforts to enact voting laws that would make fair, diverse and (small d) democratic governance impossible. Republicans favor such laws in California, where they are unlikely to win approval, but they passed last year in Georgia, Arizona and Texas. A double handful of other states, where the odds of success are greater, are considering their own versions.

But not if Berlin can help it. Berlin is a genial guy who is deadly serious about improving governance, both here and elsewhere, by overwhelming Republican efforts to make voting more difficult, especially in battleground states. He wants to help turn out 1 million new voters come November.

If you think political activism means angry people in Birkenstocks, says *New Faces of Democracy*, a website of videos and podcasts, "Let Jason and his infectious good humor prove you wrong." His slogan is: "Register Democrats, Save the World." This, Berlin said, "is the most meaningful work I've ever done."

But will it be enough to overcome gerrymandered congressional districts, shortened voting hours, and laws that could allow state and local election officials to overturn the popular vote?

**THE TREES ENTWINING INTO A CANOPY** over much of Berlin's property in Mount Washington, in northeast Los Angeles, bear impressive crops of lemons. But Berlin doesn't make lemonade. Instead, the fruit went to hungry families last year, courtesy of a local food bank. And don't call the squirrel, who darts among the branches, a pest. She is Daisy, a friend of his, comfortable enough to approach his open palm for a treat.

Voter registration is political scut work, long the province of retired women and wild-haired college students bent on changing the world. Berlin is neither. A former stand-up comedian who had no significant political background, he became so distraught at Donald Trump's election that he quit Hollywood, worked briefly for the California Democratic Party, then created Field Team Six, a nonprofit devoted solely to registering new Democrats.



He is a 50-year-old teddy bear of a man who struggles with social anxiety, but he has built the organization into a Democratic powerhouse driving voter registration nationally. It has partnered with Democratic grassroots groups across the country with a particular focus on nine swing states.

Field Team Six has created new online tools enabling eligible voters to register through their cellphones and new digital ways to track whether contacts follow through and register. It says it helped register more than 1.7 million new Democrats during the 18 months before the November 2020 election.

Still, political scientists like UCLA's Matt Barreto are worried. State laws intended to suppress voters or allow local officials to invalidate results "are already absolutely working," he said. For example, Texas officials rejected thousands of applications to vote by mail in their March 1 primary under legislation passed last year. New laws and bills pending in dozens of other states could allow local election officials to do the same.

Moreover, young voters, a focus of Berlin's efforts, can be fickle. While 2020 saw a record turnout among 18- to 25-year olds, they will always vote at lower rates than people over 40, Barreto said. They don't yet have enough life experience to see how their votes can, for example, address climate change or improve their household budgets.

**BERLIN REGARDS HIS 18 YEARS IN ENTERTAINMENT** as excellent training for leading a shoestring political organization. "There is no industry more abusive [than entertainment], with such a high poverty and high insecurity threshold," he said, as birds chirped above and traffic thrummed on the 110 Freeway below.

The New Jersey native — his mother is an award-winning poet and his father an orthopedic surgeon — grew up in a politically split household. Mom is a lifetime liberal who has campaigned for many candidates and causes. Dad was a conservative who voted for Trump in 2016 but, impressed by his son's activism, has since become a Democrat and voted for Biden.

A film class at Harvard fixed Berlin's sights on Hollywood. In 1995, he moved to Los Angeles to enroll in a directing program at the American Film Institute. Like many, he toiled on Hollywood's bottom rungs, working as a boom operator and writer for a handful of mostly forgettable scripted and reality TV shows. Typical was "Headtrip," a short-lived MTV production featuring animated characters with the heads of various celebrities who performed brief skits. "It was a triumph," Berlin said, "that all the episodes were aired once before it was pulled."

Stand-up comedy was a side gig and a strategy to conquer shyness that had dogged him since childhood. Berlin said he learned how to "throw a shitty joke out there" and not crumble when it bombed. That ease, plus his quiet humor and the self-deprecatory act he honed onstage, have drawn a devoted cadre of volunteers in awe of his ability to persuade reluctant strangers to register to vote.

One of those volunteers, retired lawyer Lore Hilburg, recalls asking two young women, paid solicitors for a refugee group at Fullerton Community College, if she could register them as Democrats before the 2018 midterms. An older man shooed her away, insisting that the women were his employees and couldn't do personal business while working. Hilburg left but later noticed Berlin at the table, his arm around the brusque boss. Within minutes he'd registered all three.

"I'm an old person with a clipboard," said Hilburg, who is 70. "They stop for Jason because he has such a grin on his face. He's the kind of person you just want to stop and talk with."

**TRUMP'S ELECTION HIT BERLIN LIKE AN EARTHQUAKE.** He had phone-banked for Bernie Sanders but ended up voting for Hillary Clinton.

He tells his salvation story often: He and his wife, Apryl Lundsten, a documentary film maker, hosted an election night party. "People were collapsing on the couch sobbing," he said. Berlin found his way to a Swing Left meeting in Chinatown. "I almost didn't go in." (It was his social anxiety.) When he did, he remembers feeling like "finally, I could breathe just by being around people who all felt the same."

Berlin signed on as a regional organizer for the California Democratic Party during the 2018 midterm election campaign, helping to notch historic wins in Orange County and Lancaster congressional districts long held by Republicans.

After the polls closed, he and the other organizers were out of a job. By that point, however, Berlin had found his purpose. He was convinced that neither major political party appreciated the difference new voters, especially young voters, could make in tight races.

In 2018, he founded Field Team 6. The name is a play on SEAL Team Six, the elite Navy unit that killed Osama bin Laden in 2011. It also is Berlin's tribute to six Boomer women (Hilburg among them) who were his most effective and loyal volunteers during the 2018 midterms.

"The idea to start this was delusional," he said. He'd never run anything before and had no seed money, only his credit card. "All these volunteers have made it a reality."

## "The idea to start this was delusional. All these volunteers have made it a reality."

— Jason Berlin

**BERLIN'S APPROACH IS CHEERY AND INSISTENT.** Forget about volunteers who sit at a card table outside a grocery store waiting for someone to stop by and ask to register. That's old-school. Berlin and his volunteers fan out across college lawns; they walk right up to shoppers loading their SUVs; and they seek out worried-looking folks hurrying into or out of courthouses.

"Can I register you to vote as a Democrat today and save the world?" they ask. The hyperbole is intentional and serious.

Say "no, thanks" or "I'm not into politics," or try to wave them off, and they will trot alongside you smiling and talking about the perilous state of American democracy and the power of a single vote.

If you haven't already registered, then you probably will. Right there. Or in Berlin-speak, you will "just go limp in the jaws of the cheetah."

His conviction and enthusiasm overcame my own reluctance to pester strangers. Canvassing with him and others in Orange County, Lancaster and later in Phoenix before the 2018 midterms, we scored a bunch of new voters. In Phoenix, as late-April temperatures hovered near triple digits downtown, I scrambled for shade, but Berlin tugged the brim of his baseball cap lower against the sun and kept walking, clipboard in hand.

State and federal laws generally require that volunteers give a registration form to anyone who asks, no matter their political preference. Field Team 6 volunteers wear T-shirts or buttons with an image of Ruth Bader Ginsburg or Barack Obama, for example, signaling their Democratic bent and creating what Berlin calls a "force field that repels Republicans."

**WHEN COVID SHUT DOWN FACE-TO-FACE REGISTRATION,** many grassroots groups stepped up their text- and phone-banking and postcard campaigns. Field Team 6's techies went a step further.

They created Voterizer.org, which allows eligible voters in any state to register online by linking them to the appropriate state election office. The platform, which citizens can access directly through Voterizer's website or with a QR code, also provides state-by-state information on voter ID requirements and polling place locations and calendar reminders of upcoming elections.

Innovation and enthusiasm aside, fundraising remains a constant worry for Berlin. Off years like 2021, with no elections, are notoriously tough for political groups, and several went under after Trump left the White House and donors and volunteers began staying home. Field Team 6 managed to keep going, but "it was touch and go," Berlin said, "and it still is."

## "I get defeated too easily. But Jason says, 'I know it sucks, but here's one new voter, and another one, and you add those up and before you know it you have 8,000 more voters.'"

— Mel Ryane, a volunteer with Field Team 6

The group has only three paid staff members (Berlin is one of them). Even with script writers for text and phone banks, a social media team, graphic designers and event planners who are all volunteers, political outreach is expensive.

Berlin's 2022 fundraising goal is \$1.5 million, up from \$600,000 last year. He's hopeful. More volunteers, emerging from COVID seclusion, are signing up, and attendance at fundraising events is growing. But it's still hand-to-mouth. "We've never gotten a six-digit donation and just a handful of four-digit donations," he said. Depending on small donations makes it hard to plan.

Berlin's strength is "his absolute refusal to entertain the possibility that something won't work," said Mel Ryane, another of his original six female volunteers. "I get defeated too easily. But Jason says, 'I know it sucks, but here's one new voter, and another one, and you add those up and before you know it you have 8,000 more voters.'"

That enthusiasm can also be a problem, Ryane said. "I'm a writer, Jason is a writer. Jason always needs an editor. He can be a little long-winded." Wendy Dozoretz, another original volunteer, agrees, noting that Berlin didn't think he'd ever be running an organization of this size and reach.

**BIGGER CHALLENGES THAN BERLIN'S TENDENCY** toward verbosity loom for Field Team 6 and other Democratic groups. One is a need for generational change.

"We are all older and retired," said Dozoretz, who is 70. "It's the young people coming up who need to be recruited. That's the only way it will keep going."

UCLA's Barreto agrees, adding that with voter registration lowest among young people of color, the most successful efforts have to be led by members of those communities.

An even larger threat is the new, restrictive election laws. These laws are targeted in such a way that it reveals their intention, Barreto said, and the intention is not election integrity. If some state legislators, particularly in swing states, attempt to set aside votes without a reason, "then we become Russia," he said, "and we've lost our democracy."

Nonetheless, Max Lubin sees reason for optimism. Lubin leads RISE, a nonprofit that trains college students around the country to organize their classmates.

Voter registration is necessary but not sufficient, he believes. Young people go to the polls at lower rates than older cohorts not because of apathy, Lubin, who is 31, argues, but because they're unfamiliar with the mechanics of voting or don't know how to evaluate candidates and issues.

He blames the gutting of civics education but sees his student organizers as filling that gap on their campuses.

Still, Lubin worries. "The work that Field Team 6 and similar groups do is essential to increasing participation and strengthening our democracy. But you can't out-organize voter suppression." ▸



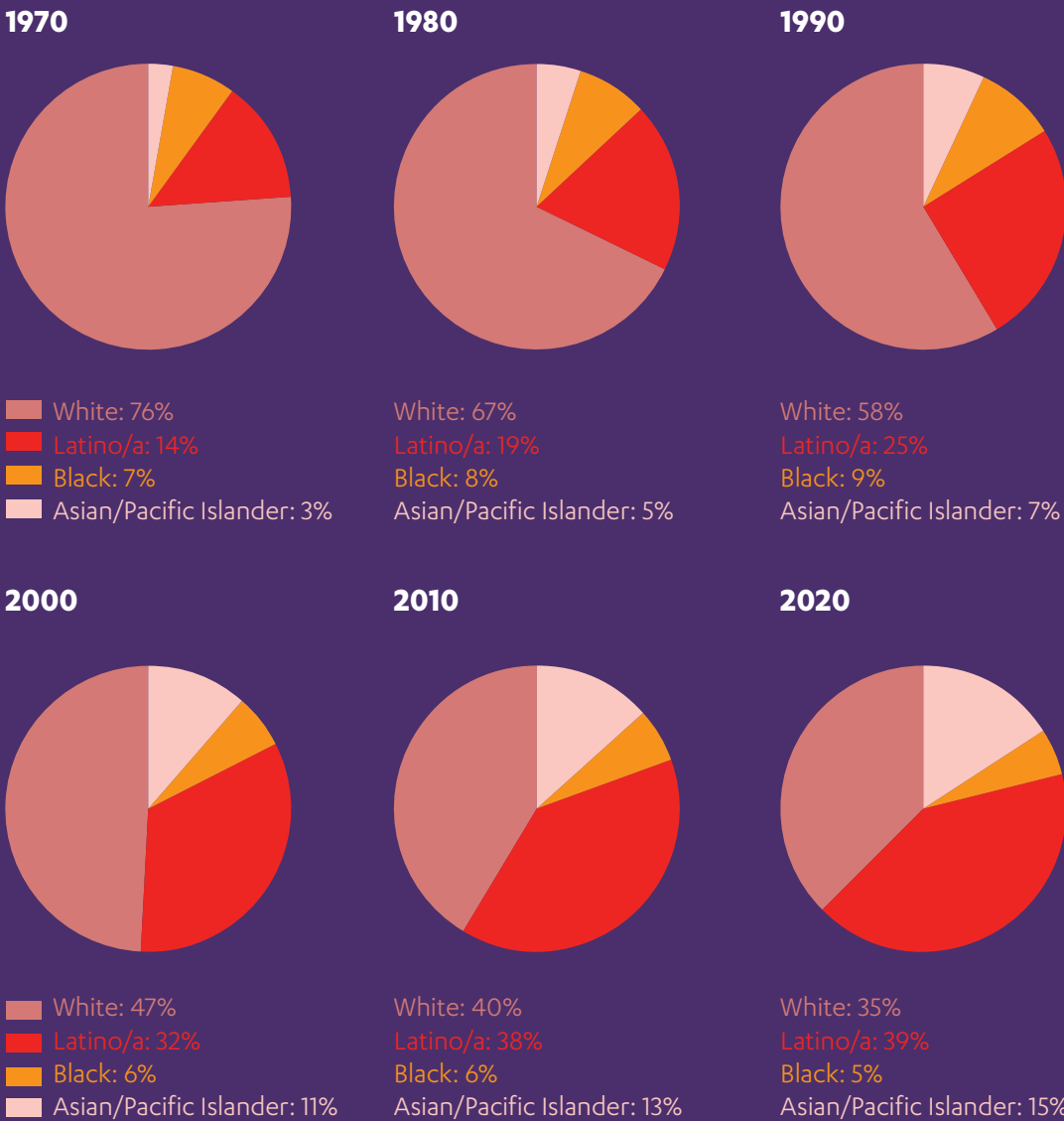
BERLIN MEETS WITH A GROUP OF VOLUNTEERS ON THE DECK OF HIS HOME.



# The Changing Face of California

California’s fastest-growing ethnic groups are Asians and Latino/as, with Latino/as surpassing Whites as the largest ethnic group in the state, on the way to becoming a majority in the coming decades. Whites and Blacks are declining as a share of the population and electorate.

Source:  
Census Bureau/Public Policy  
Institute of California



## Overall Population

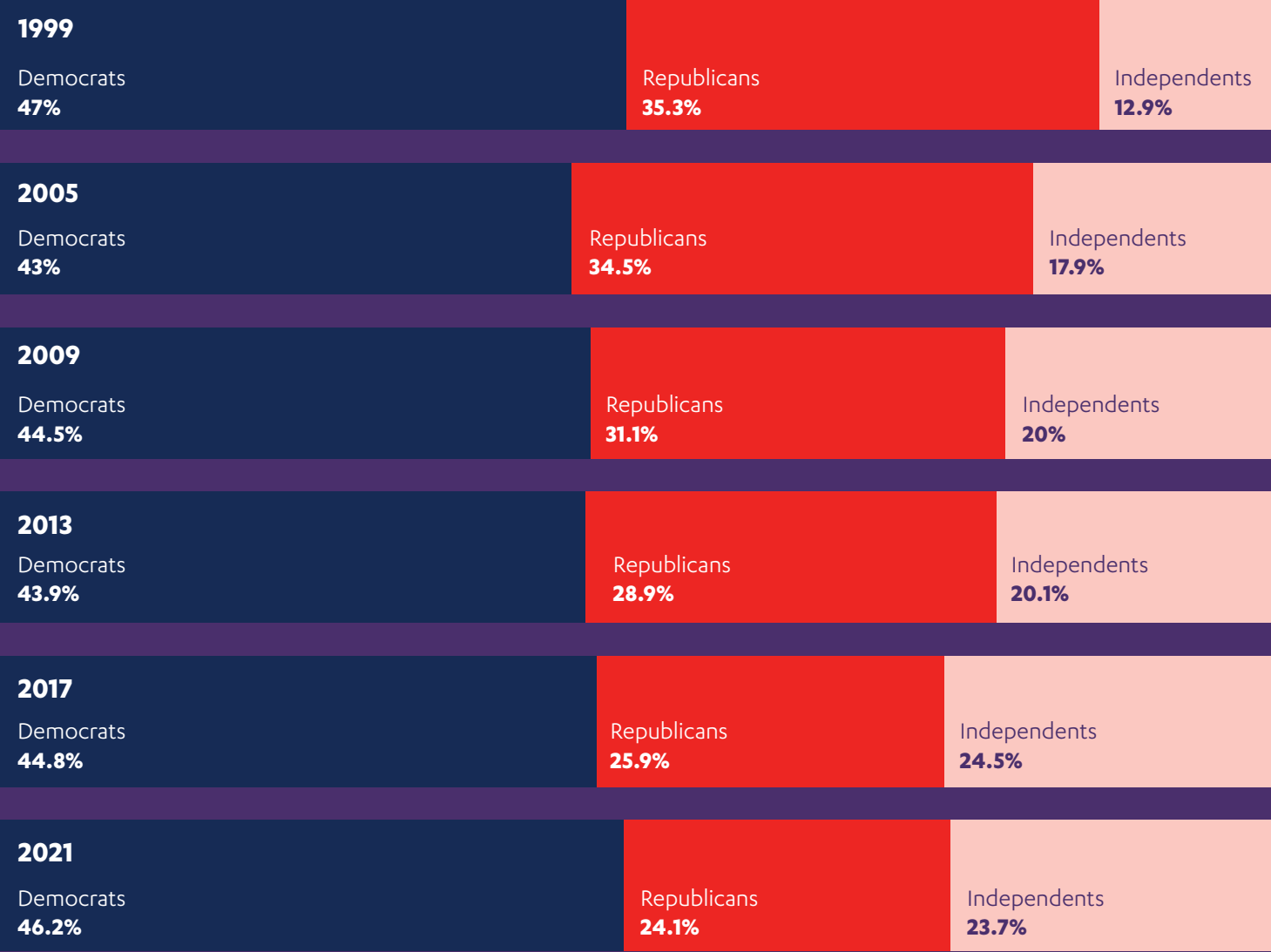
California’s rate of growth has slowed in recent years, but it continues to grow in overall numbers and maintains its place as the most populous state in America. Approximately one in every eight Americans lives in California.

Source: U.S. Census



## Party Affiliation

The Republican Party’s fortunes have plummeted in California in recent years as Latino/as, the state’s largest demographic, have allied with Democrats and many moderates fled during the era of Donald Trump. Democratic registration has stayed relatively stable, while the number of Californians who decline to affiliate with a major party has grown.



**Note:** Voter registration data in California is complicated by confusion between those who decline to affiliate with a political party and those who register with the “American Independent Party.” The data reported here is for those who decline any party affiliation. As of 2021, another 3% of Californians registered with the American Independent Party. It’s impossible to know how many of those did so in the mistaken belief that they were declaring independence from all political parties.

Source: California Secretary of State

## What Worries Californians?

A survey by the Public Policy Institute of California in early 2022 asked residents to name the issues that most concern them. Their top five responses:

Source:  
PPIC survey of 1,640 California adult residents  
conducted Jan. 16-25, 2022.



On the web:  
<https://bit.ly/3kcwd6Q>

# WHEN POLICE BRING *FEAR*

Confrontations with tramautized suspects too-often  
end in shootings. How to change?

WRITTEN BY  
ROBERT GREENE





**THE ESSENCE OF THE AMERICAN EMERGENCY RESPONSE SYSTEM IS,** like so much else in our society, encapsulated in a line from *The Simpsons*.

“Hello! Operator!” Homer Simpson shouts into his phone in an early episode. “Give me the number for 911!”

Behind the joke is this bit of truth: 911 is so ingrained in our consciousness that it has become synonymous with “emergency” and “rescue.”

The theory is that by calling that number anywhere in the United States, one is immediately connected with an expert who will quickly determine the nature of the problem and dispatch the closest firefighters, paramedics or police officers wearing Batman-like utility belts full of tools they will use to render aid and defuse tense situations. 911 is meant to be the taxpayer’s key to a concierge-like government response. It’s the front end of a system in which police are seen as neighborhood problem solvers, sort of like 19<sup>th</sup> Century English bobbies, but dispatched by phone call rather than walking a beat, and amped up with cutting-edge technology, high-grade weapons and rigorous training.

Too often things work out differently than expected, though, especially for someone experiencing a behavioral crisis triggered by emotional trauma, mental illness or substance use. Consider, for example, the tragic case of Miles Hall, a 23-year-old man with a history of mental health problems, shot to death a block from his Walnut Creek home in 2019 by police responding to his family’s call for help when he was in crisis. Or Isaias Cervantes, a 25-year-old autistic and deaf man, shot and paralyzed in his own home in 2021 by Los Angeles County sheriff’s deputies whom his family had called when his mother had some trouble managing him. Or countless others killed or injured by police who had been called in order to get bobby-like assistance to defuse, calm and help, but who instead responded with guns blazing.

The 911 system and the often misplaced public expectations it represents lie at the heart of the urgent policy debate over excessive police force, mental health and equity. Along with policing, the nation’s program for emergency response is undergoing a long-overdue examination, especially in how it

fails the poor, the sick, people of color and others most marginalized in U.S. society and most likely to be in harm’s way. Few subjects have attracted as much examination by policymakers and researchers in the past decade.

The proportion of Americans killed by police who had a mental illness is generally estimated at about 25%, but that’s conservative. Include people living with any type of intellectual disability or cognitive difference, or any emotional trauma or substance-use disorder that is expressed in behavior that police see as uncooperative, dangerous or simply unexpected, and the percentage is likely at least twice that.

These are multiple tragedies: for parents at their wits’ end whose desperate calls for help lead instead to needless police escalation ending in injury or death; for a public losing faith in the competence of its law enforcement agencies; for officers who want to help but whose training focuses on responding to armed criminals; and for Americans of color who perceive, correctly, that their kids with disabilities or behavioral challenges have a greater chance of dying at the hands of police than do their white counterparts.

Reformers intent on fixing the problem once focused exclusively on improving the quality of the “concierge”: Give police better tools, better funding and, above all, better training. Or include a mental health team when officers respond to calls.

But the tragedies continued, and the discussion shifted. Maybe 911 was the wrong number to call, the police the wrong people to send, and the backseat of a patrol car or a jail cell the wrong place to address a behavioral breakdown or treat a mental illness. Perhaps there could be an alternative system of crisis response, one without guns or badges, or even people whose training focused on confrontation and crime.

By 2019, a movement had coalesced and thinkers had landed on a plan: Get a new number, with new responders and new systems to support them on the phone, at home or if necessary in clinics. Almost unnoticed, municipalities, federal agencies and nonprofit service providers joined to create 988, not just a parallel phone number but an entire planned complex of unarmed crisis response. In California, a key piece of authorizing legislation now pending before lawmakers is appropriately designated Assembly Bill 988.

It’s also known as the Miles Hall Lifeline Act, in recognition of the young man shot dead, rather than aided, by Walnut Creek police. It was introduced by Rebecca Bauer-Kahan, whose Assembly district includes that Bay Area city.

In Los Angeles County, Supervisor Janice Hahn launched several programs that put county agencies at the forefront of 988 planning. There, the system is known as alternative crisis response — meaning an alternative to police. L.A. city officials prefer the term unarmed crisis response for their various pilot programs, but the point is the same.

The new system was already on the drawing boards of hundreds of cities and counties across the nation in May 2020, when George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer and angry and often violent protests called for defunding not just police but jails, prisons, juvenile probation and, in fact, most parts of a criminal legal system often seen as unjust and grounded in white supremacy.

The events of that tumultuous year increased the interest in alternative crisis response programs and lent efforts an anti-police tinge that, depending on one’s view, was either a distraction or the entire point of the exercise.

Special attention was given a program begun in 1989 in Eugene, Oregon,

# ARE ALL THE COMPONENTS READY FOR THE 988 RESPONSE SYSTEM? NOT EVEN CLOSE.

known as CAHOOTS: Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets. The program diverts 911 calls for assistance with mental health and cognitive problems to clinicians and other staff at the nonprofit White Bird clinic. They respond without guns, and with training of an entirely different nature. Instead of jail or the ER, patients are taken to sobering centers, mental health clinics or just a place to chat with peers, as the situation requires.

The nationwide 988 system is envisioned as a means to direct similar calls in every part of the United States, meaning of course there would have to be clinics and properly trained staffs in each community to back up the new phone number. It could be the single biggest development in the way that government responds to emergencies since the first 911 call in 1969. And it’s due to come online on July 16.

Are all the components ready? Not even close.

Completing the system won’t come cheap, and there has been considerable pushback. There are labor issues, for example. Public mental health clinicians aren’t available 24/7, and their unions aren’t always pleased with private sector contractors filling in. There has been some tension over whether the best person to respond at the scene of a crisis might be a mental health clinician, or a peer counselor with no professional training but valuable lived experience. Funding is needed for training, hiring and evaluation.

Ideology plays a role as well. Some see the 988 project as a way to reduce or eliminate police presence in American life, and current police budgets as the obvious source of the needed funding. Others see an essential complement to police that allows officers to focus on crime-fighting by designating someone else to deal with the cognitively atypical, whose needs were never met by a promised but undelivered network of community clinics after the “deinstitutionalization” of the mentally ill dating back to the 1950s. The

differing points of view lead to differing strategies for building, funding and operating the system.

And there is a small but growing core of people who care for mentally ill or simply atypical family members who dismiss even 988 as too much government and too much bureaucracy to secure a positive outcome in the event of a crisis. The solution, they suggest, is a program of mutual aid among affected families and stronger ties to neighbors, to educate them on who to call (in other words, not the police, not 911, not 988) when they witness unexpected behavior. Interestingly, this mistrust-the-government, do-it-ourselves approach has been adopted by Americans of widely diverging political viewpoints, and is touted as much on the left as the right.

Still, it’s hard to get away from the seductive notion of a government concierge with a utility belt, ready to solve all problems. And isn’t that what we expect a police officer to be? In Eugene, it’s worth remembering, there’s a reason they chose the name CAHOOTS: The inside joke is that the nonprofit clinic is in cahoots with the cops. And indeed, police and White Bird staffers work together closely. If CAHOOTS is called, for example, about an apparently mentally unstable person walking in the middle of traffic, they know that’s not something they’re equipped to deal with. That’s a safety hazard and, besides, a violation of law. The crisis workers’ agreed response would be to call the police.

But in any event, 988 is coming, and it holds a great deal of promise, if it garners the commitment, the funding and the public attention required to make it work. It could end up being as pointless as just another phone number. Or it could be the beginning of a transformed emergency system that finally gives people in crisis but non-criminal situations someone to call, someone to come, and somewhere to go. ▀





PHOTO BY LPETIT / ISTOCK

# On Politics and Demographics

As California grows, it’s changing.  
Representation adjusts more slowly.

WRITTEN BY  
LISA FUNG

**AS THE 2020 CAMPAIGN NEARED ITS PEAK,** both Joe Biden and Donald Trump began pouring millions of dollars into advertising and other efforts to reach Latino/a voters.

“We’re not taking anything for granted in this election,” Jennifer Molina, Biden’s Latino/a media director, told *Politico*. “The Latino vote is critically important.”

On the heels of those efforts, the Biden campaign turned its attention to Asian American and Pacific Islanders. It released a star-studded video just before Election Day encouraging them to vote. The video featured dozens of AAPI notables, including Mindy Kaling, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, Lucy Liu, Padma Lakshmi and Yo-Yo Ma. Kamala Harris, who is of South Asian descent, delivered the final message. It was simple. “When we vote, things change,” she said. “When we vote, we win.”

For Latino/a and Asian American voters, this was more than political rhetoric. Winning elections can bring change, not just in who holds office but also in the way California and the nation are governed.

According to the 2020 Census, Asian Americans and Latino/as were the fastest-growing among all racial and ethnic groups in the United States between 2000 and 2019. In California, the Asian American population rose by 25% to 5.8 million, while the Latino/a population grew by about 11% to about 15.5 million, or nearly 40% of

the state’s 39 million residents. By comparison, the number of White people in the state decreased by 24%, the Census figures show.

“Because of immigration, new Latino and new Asian American voters are being added in every election cycle,” said Natalie Masuoka, an associate professor of political science and Asian American studies at UCLA and author of the book *Multiracial Identity and Racial Politics in the United States*.

“This is an amazing American democracy story,” Masuoka said in an interview. “The two largest immigrant groups in the country are literally adding new voters.”

Historically, influxes of new voters, such as European immigrants in the late 1800s to early 1900s, or Blacks after emancipation, have reshaped the American political landscape. This time, it’s Asians and Latino/as. While these new voters are increasingly showing how they can effect change, the full impact of Asian Americans and Latino/as has yet to be felt.

When it is, the influence on governance is likely to be strong.

**FIRST, LATINO/AS AND ASIAN AMERICANS** must cast ballots.

In California, 8.3 million Latino/as and almost 4 million Asian Americans were eligible to vote in 2020, but just 60.4% of Latino/as and 62.9% of Asian Americans registered to vote, according to a



“Once that mobilization started with on-the-ground partners and organizations explaining to the Latino voters what was at stake if [Gov. Gavin] Newsom was ousted from the governor’s office, it didn’t take much for Latino voters to understand, ‘Hey, there’s a lot at stake.’”

— Rodrigo Domínguez-Villegas, director of the UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Initiative

new UCLA report by the Latino Policy and Politics Initiative. By comparison, 78.2 % of eligible Whites registered. For Blacks, it was 68.1%.

When it came to actually voting, the report found, the percentages dropped further: Latino/as 54.7%; Asians 59.9%; Blacks 64%; and Whites 74.5%.

Latino/as were the only demographic group in California whose registration and voting rates were more than 10 percentage points below national averages, while Asian Americans had the second-lowest registration and turnout rates. Non-Hispanic Whites were the only group in the state with a higher registration and turnout rate than the national average, according to the study.

“For Latino and Asian groups, there’s a gap in mobilization, a gap in investment to mobilize Latino and Asian voters and capture the diversity within their communities in a culturally competent manner in order to get more Latino and Asian voters to register and to show up at the polls,” said Roberto Domínguez-Villegas, director of research at LPPI, who authored the report.

Latino/a and Asian American voters have been seen by both political parties largely as monoliths, but their diversity is well documented. In California, as in the rest of the country, most Latino/a voters have tended to side with Democrats, but that affiliation varies by election cycle and by candidate and issue. Even Trump, who famously derided Mexican immigrants as rapists and murderers, won the support of about a third of Latino/a voters in 2020.

Moreover, racial classifications themselves are transforming. The 2020 Census shows that about 33.8 million people now identify as multiracial, in contrast to about 9 million a decade ago — a 276% increase.

“What’s amazing about California politics is the growing political power of Asian American and Latino voters at the individual level — not thinking about Asian American and Latino voters as a homogeneous group — and the growing realization from all Californians that these new waves of electorates really can shift voting outcomes,” said Masuoka, who co-authored a separate study that tracked racial differences in voting on 12 statewide propositions on the 2020 California ballot.

Although political consultants may still see these voters as monoliths, the findings of that study dispel notions of a homogeneous Asian vote or Latino/a vote, while showing that external regional factors and campaign messaging played a role in the outcome of these measures.

“What was striking about what we learned from looking at the analysis from across California is that there is a lot of important regional variation, with Bay Area voters of all races voting in favor of more liberal positions on propositions than in Los Angeles and portions of Southern California,” Masuoka said. “Even though we think about our big cities as being the most liberal areas,

we were showing that within California there are important regional variations.”

This geographical impact on voting was notable, for example, on an affirmative action measure, which demonstrated not only a regional variation but also a racial one. Proposition 16 called for the repeal of 1996’s Proposition 209, which changed the state constitution to prohibit state government and public institutions from considering race, sex, ethnicity or national origin in public employment, education and contracting.

“We were struck by the amount of heterogeneity on affirmative action,” Masuoka said. “That speaks to the important role political geography continues to play in state politics. Where Asian American and Latino voters live appears to impact how they vote on policy issues.”

The study also found that voters of color can influence election results when White voters are split in their preferences, and that coalition voting between two racial groups also can have an impact: “When one racial minority group votes with White voters, they affect the level of competitiveness in an election.”

In addition, the findings provided insight into the effects of political organizing and voter education.

Proposition 22, the gig economy ballot initiative to classify rideshare and delivery drivers as independent contractors rather than employees, showed strong uniformity among voters of all races. A record-setting \$204 million was spent on Proposition 22, with the bulk of contributions — nearly \$189 million — coming from companies such as Uber, Lyft and DoorDash, while opposition came from labor unions. The proposition passed.

“Perhaps voters aren’t necessarily voting on their actual ideological or political position on these issues, but they’re strongly influenced by various interest groups that are able to create a framing that is compelling and can influence the ultimate outcome,” Masuoka said. “The outcome on Proposition 22 would suggest that when something was really highly funded and really well campaigned, the outcome was relatively more uniform.”

Big money certainly isn’t the only means of delivering a vote. Both Masuoka and Domínguez-Villegas say that trusted messengers, such as community organizations, churches and area small businesses, can be effective in helping to educate and inform new voters.

“Among Latinos, the majority speak either English or Spanish or both, but there’s a considerable number of Latinos that do not speak either English or Spanish; they speak languages that are indigenous to Mexico or Guatemala or Honduras or El Salvador. These groups are culturally and religiously diverse — especially Asians,” Domínguez-Villegas said in an interview. “It’s important that political parties and state officials and county officials in charge of organizing elections and mobilizing voters take a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to these two groups.”

Many new voters, particularly first-generation immigrants, come from countries where the political system is unlike that of the United States; so there are varying degrees of familiarity with the U.S. electoral system, Domínguez-Villegas said. Providing additional levels of voter education may be seen as costly and time-consuming. And even when attempts are made to educate voters on why they should vote for a particular candidate or proposition, those efforts often occur at the last minute.

During the 2021 bid to recall Gov. Gavin Newsom, for example, recall backers cited the governor’s support of sanctuary status and other policies regarding undocumented immigrants among reasons to vote him out. But that same issue spoke to many Latino/a voters in a different way, and late efforts to mobilize voters helped secure Newsom’s victory.

“Once that mobilization started with on-the-ground partners and organizations explaining to the Latino voters what was at stake if Newsom was ousted from the governor’s office, it didn’t take much for Latino voters to understand, ‘Hey, there’s a lot at stake,’” Domínguez-Villegas said. “A lot of them showed up, and over 80% of Latino voters voted for Newsom to stay.”

This afterthought attitude, he said, stems from political parties mistakenly seeing Latino/as and Asian Americans as non-voters and thus failing to invest in efforts to bring them in.

According to a study by the Pew Research Center, 84% of eligible voters said they were contacted by a candidate’s campaign or by a group supporting a candidate in at least one of six ways during the month before the November 2020 election. Of that group, 74% of English-speaking,

eligible Asian voters and 75% of eligible Hispanic voters said they were contacted, in contrast to 87% for Whites and 82% for Blacks.

“Over and over, we’ve seen examples where, if and when political parties invest in actually producing campaign materials in the different languages that the different groups speak, and actually mobilize and get on the ground and talk to voters, then people register and vote,” Domínguez-Villegas said.

The LPPI study provided insight into where the gaps exist in voter participation, which will allow campaigns to find ways to encourage people to participate in the election process and ensure their voices and needs are heard, he said.

“We think that the right to vote for everybody is equal. Therefore, everybody should have access to the same information in the same way as every other voter.”

**THE FEDERAL VOTING RIGHTS ACT** requires that in counties where more than 10,000 people, or 5% of the population, speak a language other than English, election materials and ballots in that language must be provided. But this doesn’t ensure that voting will take place.

“You might be able to read it in your native language, but do you understand how this fixes or changes existing law?” Matsuoaka said. “That goes back to an education issue.

“Upholding the Voting Rights Act is something that is under serious, serious attack,” she said. “Over the last few years, there has been a slow reversal of different items in the Voting Rights Act, which basically barred discrimination in access to the ballot box. We are heading into a very scary period where we are worried now that the Voting Rights Act is something that will no longer exist for us.”

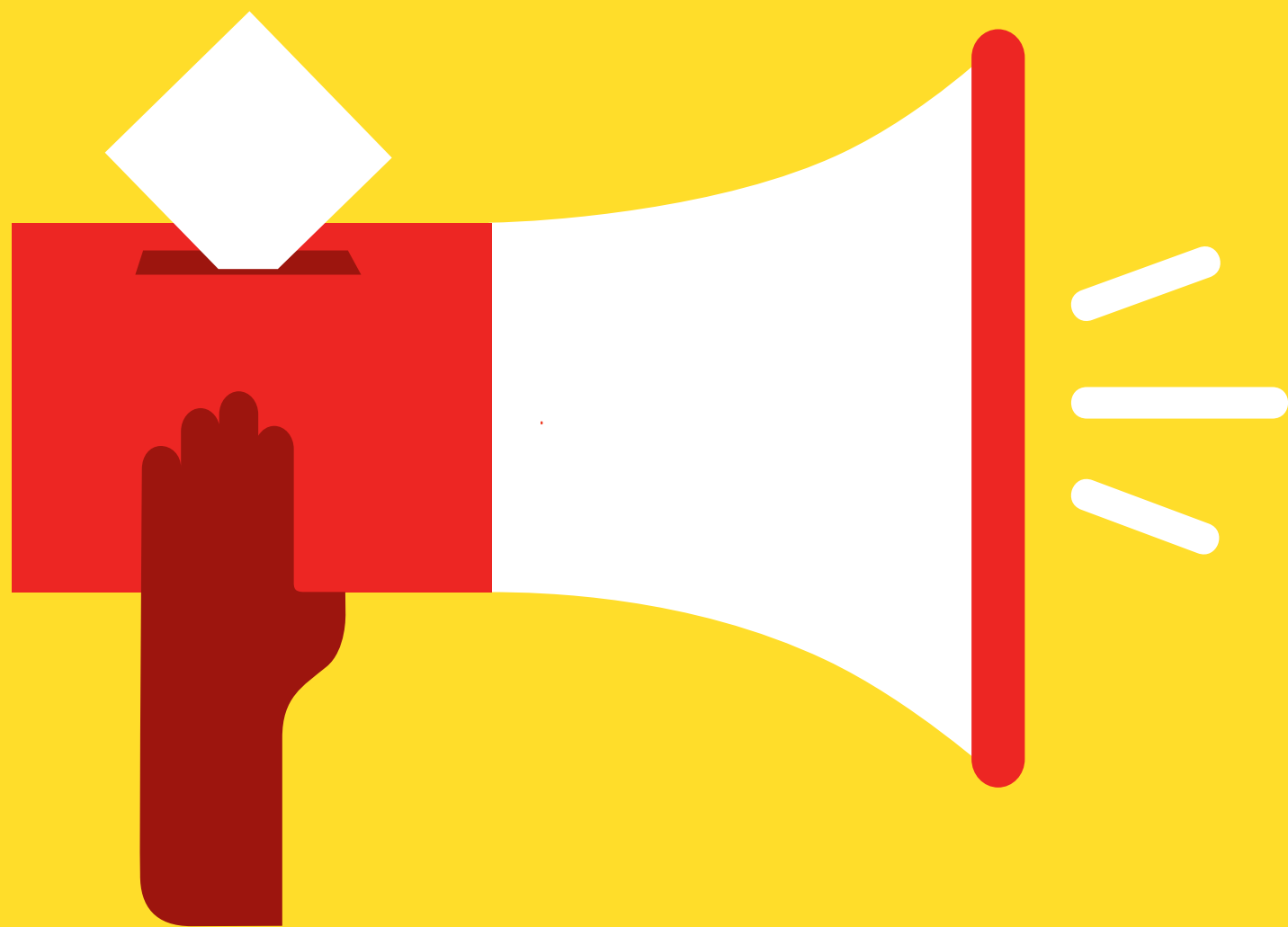
That battle may eventually become part of voter education and mobilization. Change comes, Domínguez-Villegas said, when there is sustained engagement of voters and educational outreach. But, as his report shows, more needs to be done.

Currently, non-Hispanic White Californians make up 37% of the state’s population and account for 54% of the state Assembly and Senate. Latino/as comprise about 39% of the population and 25% of the state Legislature. Asian and Pacific Islanders are 15% of the population, with 12% representation in the Legislature. For African Americans, there is near parity: 7% of the population and 8% representation.

“Given that the state is becoming more diverse, we need to figure out ways to make sure that these groups are able to elect people who represent them,” Domínguez-Villegas said. “What’s needed are policies that would allow these groups to fully participate in electoral politics in the state so those populations are reflected in the elected officials making decisions for all Californians.” ▶

PHOTO BY SORA SHIMAZAKI / PEXELS





# TO REFORM THE REFORMS

California pioneered  
direct democracy.  
Has it run its course?

WRITTEN BY  
**KAT SCHUSTER**

**JOHN RANDOLPH HAYNES**, the pioneering socialist physician and political reformer, believed that voters were their own best defenders. “The remedy for the evils of democracy,” he famously proclaimed, “is more democracy.”

Gov. Hiram Johnson took up that call and gave Californians the trio of reforms — the referendum, initiative and recall — that have formed the basis for this state’s version of direct democracy since they were enacted, by voters of course, in 1911. Now, just over a century later, some are questioning whether those reforms have outlived their usefulness and whether the recall in particular is in need of overhaul. Is it time to reform the reforms?

The impetus for this latest call to reform grows out of the unsuccessful effort to remove Gov. Gavin Newsom from office in 2021. Supporters of the Newsom recall collected the signatures necessary to force a vote, only to fall woefully short of removing him — but not before it cost taxpayers \$200 million and overshadowed California politics for more than a year. If anything, it left Newsom even stronger politically.

“I think, ultimately, it’s really fair to say that this recall was a huge waste of time and money during a global pandemic that personally affected the livelihoods of so many Californians,” said Michael Rios, an elections expert at UCLA’s Latino Policy and Politics Department.



“They’re not perfect, and they certainly are candidates for change and for modification.”

— Zev Yaroslavsky, director of the Los Angeles Initiative at UCLA’s Luskin School, on California’s Progressive-era reform laws

Rios’ opinion is echoed by 78% of likely voters who participated in a survey conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California in February that said last year’s recall was a “waste of money.” But those same respondents were unwilling to ditch the idea altogether: Even as large majorities favored changing the structure of the recall, 86% said they believed some form of recall was necessary.

“The people really want the process,” said Mark Baldassare, who has directed the PPIC Statewide Survey since 1998. “But we saw in our polling that Californians also said that changes were needed.”

**THE RECALL WAS AT THE CENTER** of California’s attention in 2021, but the bigger influence on the state’s history has been the initiative. From limiting property taxes in 1978 to creating term limits for elected officials and longer prison sentences for criminal defendants, the process has spurred major policy changes in the state, in some cases touching off national movements as well.

And though other states have their versions of direct democracy, no other state except Oregon has used the process as much as California. The PPIC found that since 1912, 392 citizens’ initiatives have appeared on the California ballot.

Distrust in California’s lawmakers is the main driver for use of the referendum and the initiative, which helps explain why even though the process is expensive, distracting and sometimes cumbersome, voters are historically unwilling to give it up at the urging of the same politicians whom they are disinclined to believe.

That has not prevented tinkering with the mechanisms adopted in 1911. Voters have passed significant initiative reforms. In 1966, Proposition 1a lowered the number of signatures required for initiative statutes. And in 1974 Proposition 9 changed the initiative information required in ballot pamphlets.

Voters have supported reforms to “increase transparency, involve the Legislature and engage the public,” according to PPIC.

But even amid those reforms, the initiative and referendum, like the recall, have faced questions of whether they could be susceptible to overuse or abuse.

Zev Yaroslavsky, director of the Los Angeles Initiative at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, said he recently completed a review of every ballot measure and initiative that has ever landed on the ballot. The results were telling. “It was fascinating because most of the time people get it right,” he said, “but that doesn’t mean they always get it right.”

In some cases, the popular will of the moment has confronted deeper trends in American life. Proposition 14 repealed the Rumford Fair Housing Act in 1964, removing a safeguard against racial discrimination in housing. In 2008, Proposition 8 passed to ban same-sex marriage.

“The courts backstopped these,” said Yaroslavsky, who held public office for decades as a member of the Los Angeles City Council and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. “They intervened when the voters clearly transgressed the U.S. Constitution.”

According to Yaroslavsky, the referendum, the initiative and the recall are vital to upholding democracy, but that doesn’t mean they’re bulletproof. “They’re not perfect, and they certainly are candidates for change and for modification,” he said.

**THE ATTEMPT TO RECALL NEWSOM** left no one happy. Supporters fell short, while for Newsom, it was a distraction during months that the COVID crisis was bearing down. Looking back at the experience now, some believe a lasting effect of that 2021 battle was to expose the vulnerability of California’s recall process to political opportunism.

California is, of course, among the nation’s bluest states. Democrats represent about 47% of all voters; the next largest group is independents at 29% and Republicans make up about 24% of the electorate. That makes political calculations for Republicans extremely challenging.

“I think those numbers alone suggest that Republican leadership in California are aware that they likely cannot win a conventional gubernatorial election,” Rios said. “And so they attempted to use a recall mechanism in the state constitution to take control of that office.”

The recall is tempting because it imposes different rules than a conventional election. In a normal election, a Republican needs to defeat an opponent, usually a Democrat. But in a recall, a Republican could ascend to office merely by persuading half the voters to reject the incumbent and then sliding into office as the top voter-getter among the replacement candidates, potentially a fraction of the votes that the incumbent received. That’s an appealing alternative made possible by the relative ease of qualifying a recall for the ballot.

In February, the Little Hoover Commission — an independent government oversight agency — published a list of recommendations for updating the recall. Two ideas dominated: raising the signature threshold to qualify a recall and amending the process for selecting a successor in the event that a recall is successful.

Current state law requires organizers of a recall to gather signatures equal to 12% of the votes cast in the last gubernatorial election in order to put the matter before voters. The Little Hoover Commission believes the state should adjust the signature requirement to 10% of registered voters.

“It’s a lower percentage because you’re talking about registered voters, but it’s actually a larger number,” said Ethan Rarick, executive director of the commission. “That change would serve as a protection against potential overuse of the recall.”

Rios agrees. “I do think that threshold needs to be much higher, because it isn’t representative



GOV. GAVIN NEWSOM SPEAKS AHEAD OF VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS AT A RALLY IN SAN LEANDRO ON SEPT. 8.

of the population,” he said. “I think there’s a lot of questions about buying signatures and things that make it too big of a ploy to cost the state \$200 million.”

But not everyone is sold. According to Yaroslavsky, turning that dial up would only make the process more susceptible to abuse. “It won’t stop special interests from qualifying recalls, initiatives or referenda,” he argued. “It will make it harder for legitimate grassroots people who don’t have hundreds of millions of dollars to pay signature gatherers. It’ll take them out of the game, completely. They’re really not in the game because it’s so difficult now to do it.”

Beyond the signature threshold, which applies to referenda and initiatives as well, the recall includes a replacement mechanism, and that, too, has drawn critical fire in the wake of the Newsom effort.

On the ballot, voters were asked two questions: Should Newsom be recalled, and who should replace him? If a majority had voted to oust him, the candidate with the most votes on the second question would have taken Newsom’s seat, even if that candidate won fewer votes than the governor. In other words, 49% of voters might have supported Newsom, and he would have lost, while 20% — or even fewer — might have voted for one of the candidates to succeed him, and that person would have become governor.

“That’s just plain undemocratic,” Yaroslavsky said. Responding to this widely shared criticism, the Little Hoover Commission proposed to eliminate the yes/no question entirely, and instead place the standing elected official among the other candidates on the ballot. Under that simpler system, the governor and his opponents would all run against one another, and whoever got the most votes would be the winner.

Another suggestion would be to allow voters to vote up or down on the incumbent, but if the recall were successful, to turn the office over to the lieutenant governor. That would end the incentive for potential successors to circulate petitions and win election with a sliver of the electorate, though it might introduce new tension into the relationship between governor and lieutenant governor.

In January, State Sen. Josh Newman (D-Fullerton) proposed constitutional amendment SCA 6, which would allow a recalled governor to be replaced with the lieutenant governor.

“Constitutional amendments are not everyday events, and I don’t favor big changes for small matters,” Newman said in a statement. “But recall in California has become a partisan circus in the Internet era and must be reformed to reflect today’s political challenges and to serve the public better.”

**A CENTURY AFTER LAUNCHING** direct democracy, Californians are still wrestling with the power they asserted for themselves in the fateful elections of 1911. It has been a bumpy path in the years since that election, and the results have been as profound as they have been mixed: the genesis of the property tax revolt, gyrations in criminal justice, advances and setbacks in civil rights.

Taking stock of that history today, historians, academics and politicians join with the larger public in viewing the status quo as imperfect but worthy of reform, not of abandonment. It’s there that the larger work remains, the perfecting of imperfect but useful devices, the unsteady but insistent demand for better systems of holding the powerful to account.

“I’m a believer that it shouldn’t be easy to qualify a recall or an initiative,” Yaroslavsky said, “but it shouldn’t be impossible either.” ▀



# THE PATH TO THE BALLOT BOX

UCLA Voting Rights Project melds law tactics and social science to protect the vote

WRITTEN BY  
JON REGARDIE



**THE HEAVILY AGRICULTURAL** Yakima Valley in Washington state is about 875 miles and a world away from Los Angeles. But on January 19, the regions came together in a place that would surprise many Angelenos: U.S. District Court in the Western District of Washington.

It was there that the UCLA Voting Rights Project, working with the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund and Chicago’s Campaign Legal Center, joined a group of Washington residents to file a lawsuit charging that a state commission had drawn legislative districts that disenfranchised Latino/a voters.

Deliberately manipulating lines in a manner that will skew the results of elections makes it impossible to govern states fairly or democratically; it is both common and illegal. In a February 13 UCLA Luskin Summit webinar, Ernest Herrera, regional counsel of the Western Region for MALDEF, described a pernicious process, detailing how, although a district in Washington had a very slight majority of Latino/a residents, its boundaries intentionally included communities with less active Latino/a voters as well as rural White residents who historically have voted in ways opposed to Latino/a interests.

Herrera described it as a “façade” district, a term that made it into court filings.

“This is an attempt to prevent Latinos from being able to elect a candidate of their choice to the state Legislature,” Herrera said during the webinar. “It looks like it’s a Latino opportunity district, but it’s actually not.”

The lawsuit may sound novel to those who get their legal knowledge from TV shows and John Grisham thrillers, but it is hardly surprising to voting rights experts at UCLA, where the Voting Rights Project has emerged in a short time as an aggressive and wide-reaching electoral watchdog. Its presence is felt from classrooms in Westwood to courtrooms across the country.

The project’s work embraces the past — the 1965 federal Voting Rights Act — and it confronts the present, by challenging attempts to dilute or even deny the right to cast a ballot. The VRP also aims to influence the future by giving states the tools to create their own voting rights protections.

It seeks to ensure what, in theory, should be the sacred right of communities to elect people who truly reflect and represent them. Not surprisingly, the ones most often threatened are low-income communities of color.

“Any attempts at any level of government to complicate the voting process, particularly for Latino communities, is a deliberate attempt to undermine the democratic process of our country,” Kevin de León, a Los Angeles city councilman, former president of the state Senate and current candidate for mayor, told me on a Sunday afternoon in March. De León, who spoke at the VRP’s opening event four years ago, and whose COVID mask has the word “VOTE” splashed across it, added, “We should always make voting as easy and as accessible as possible to all citizens, regardless of their country of origin or the color of their skin.”



“YOU HAVE STATES LIKE TEXAS AND FLORIDA AND NORTH CAROLINA THAT ARE ADOPTING OMNIBUS VOTER SUPPRESSION LAWS DESIGNED TO MAKE IT HARDER TO VOTE.”

— Chad Dunn, UCLA lecturer in law and public policy

CHAD DUNN AND MATT BARRETO FOUNDED THE UCLA VOTING RIGHTS PROJECT IN 2018.



**THE VRP WAS FOUNDED** in 2018 by Chad Dunn, a civil rights attorney and UCLA lecturer in law and public policy, and Matt Barreto, a professor of political science and Chicano/a studies, who has served as an expert witness in many voting rights lawsuits. The two had worked together on court cases and found that Dunn’s legal acumen and experience dovetailed with Barreto’s social science expertise, which he uses to provide statistical analysis and testimony on topics including vote dilution and voter identification laws.

Dunn and Barreto recognized that there should be better integration between the legal and social science aspects of voting rights cases. They found a home for their project under the university’s Latino Policy and Politics Initiative, and launched it with a trio of aims: Train new lawyers and expert witnesses; develop new social science and legal theories for cases; and advance voting rights through national and local policy changes.

The threat to voting rights across the nation is no secret. Ever since a 2013 U.S. Supreme Court decision in the case of *Shelby County v. Holder*, protections have been eroded. “You have states like Texas and Florida and North Carolina,” Dunn said, “that are adopting omnibus voter suppression laws designed to make it harder to vote.”

A battalion of prominent organizations fights high-profile efforts to stifle registration or otherwise disenfranchise voters. The VRP is unique because it operates on a localized basis. Sonni Waknin, its program manager and voting rights counsel, said much of the work challenges representation on city councils, school boards and county commissions.

This might not generate widespread media coverage, but Waknin notes that when a community is prevented from electing a representative of its choice, the impacts can be severe.

“We think about statewide legislative maps and congressional maps and presidential elections, but what really impacts people every day is what their school board is doing. Are their kids getting an equal education?” she said. “Or the county commission — that dictates where hospitals are and roads are built. Will they improve the central business district in the Latino area of town, or are they going to build a Wal-Mart in the White part of town?”

The VRP has a full-time staff, but the project’s power also comes from a university class. During a year long course, dozens of law and social science students investigate jurisdictions across the country that might be in violation of voting rights laws, and they help draft a federal complaint. By the end of each spring semester, not only are some students ready to graduate and join national voting rights organizations but the VRP has cases it can file.

“We’ll have draft discovery ready, [and] proposed deposition questions,” Dunn said. “We’ll have a complete lawsuit, some preliminary expert reports or analysis. Then the VRP, on a funding or resource availability basis, will ultimately proceed with these cases.”

The research and work runs deeply. In the past year alone, the VRP has delved into cases that aim to protect the rights of Navajo Nation residents in New Mexico as well as Black and Latino/a inhabitants of Galveston County, Texas. During the 2020 election, the VRP was involved in three separate voting rights projects in Georgia.

**CALIFORNIA ALSO GETS ITS DUE.** As various decennial redistricting processes unfolded across the state after the 2020 Census, the VRP engaged in numerous efforts to make sure that communities with heavy Latino/a growth and other demographic changes were being properly represented.

The VRP authored a 24-page paper examining population shifts in Orange County and urged that a Latino/a seat be created on the Board of Supervisors. The project wrote a 10-page memo addressing changes in Riverside County, pointing out that its growth was almost exclusively from Latino/as. The VRP urged the county to adopt maps with seats for at least two Latino/a-majority districts. Another VRP paper sought to persuade supervisors in Yolo County to reject maps that would split the Latino/a population in the only district where a Latino/a had been elected.

“You have a lot of counties in California, like Yolo, where there was nobody to call until the VRP existed,” Dunn said. “At the end of the day, because of all the information and advocacy we were able to bring to bear, [Yolo] County preserved the Latino/a district. It plainly would not exist if it wasn’t for any of that work.”

The VRP’s efforts in California are critical not just for the communities of today but for the playbook they provide for the future. The population diversification that the state experienced in recent decades — it became much less White — is expected to occur in many other states during decades to come. And history shows that those who have traditionally held power will fight aggressively to keep it.

Changes the VRP helped bring about in Orange, Riverside and Yolo counties, Dunn notes, required advocates who could battle on a local level. This could play out elsewhere in the future.

“It is a struggle,” Dunn said. “It won’t necessarily turn out to be a fair-governance model like California has [now] unless there are people doing the work to make it so.”

The VRP’s budget and resources are limited, so it has to pick its battles. That is partly why the team constructed a unique tool.

In March 2021, it published a document titled the “Model Code for a State-Level Voting Rights Act.” The text includes language for a bill that lawmakers can utilize.

The U.S. Constitution does not specify a right to vote. Federal protections of voting access are a “floor,” Dunn and Waknin suggest, and not a “ceiling.” This provides an opportunity, they say, for states to create their own laws that guarantee the right to visit the ballot box.

Indeed, California, Washington and Virginia are among states that have created their own voting rights acts. The VRP’s “Model Code” includes language that could improve protections in those states and help legislators elsewhere author their own laws.

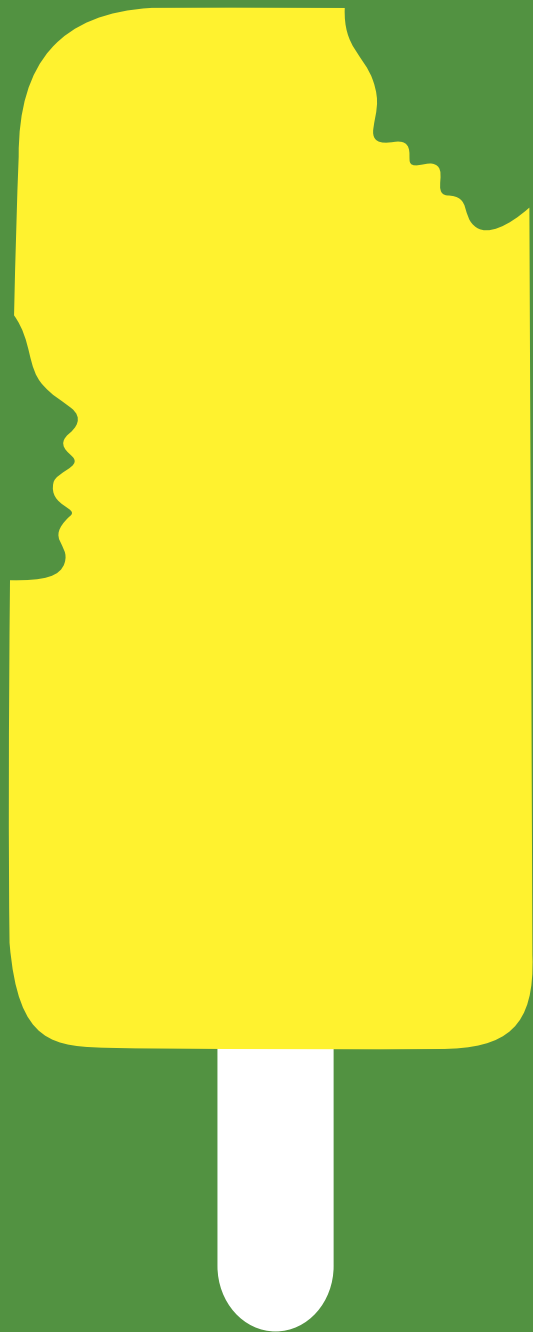
Waknin draws a powerful example showing why this is needed.

“It’s very similar to, I think, what’s happening on the state level with abortion rights,” she said. “States are understanding that the federal government is the floor, and they can offer more robust protections. As rights keep getting chipped away on the federal level, it’s very important to have a more robust state-level process.”

Battles underway in courtrooms and communities across the nation prove how critical this work is. ►

PHOTO BY LEE DUNSEITH / UCLA VOTING RIGHTS PROJECT

# What to Do With All This Money?



**CALIFORNIA CONSIDERS TAX REFORM AMID A SURPLUS**

WRITTEN BY  
**JEAN MERL**

**CALIFORNIA NEEDS HOUDINI.** Its tax system is in a straitjacket.

UCLA law professor Kirk J. Stark compares the way California raises revenue to Houdini's famous predicament. "Like the famed escapologist," Stark writes, "California has been locked in stocks, suspended in mid-air from its ankles, and lowered into a glass tank overflowing with water."

With one difference, Stark says: Houdini escaped. But California has only loosened its bonds.

In an article "Houdini Tax Reform: Can California Escape its Fiscal Straitjacket?" published by the Luskin School of Public Affairs, Stark describes the fate of the Commission on the 21st Century Economy, a bipartisan group assembled by California legislators and chaired by financier and philanthropist Gerald Parsky.

In 2009, the Parsky commission delivered recommendations for reform. The proposals met harsh criticism from across the political spectrum and died in a legislative committee.

Special interests and vast political and philosophical differences over what a new tax system should look like were widely offered as reasons for the commission's failure. But Stark, UCLA's Barrall Family Professor of Tax Law and Policy, said there are additional reasons tax reform is so hard to accomplish in California. First are constraints imposed by the state constitution, especially voter approval of property tax-slashing Proposition 13 in 1978.

Then, a year later, came its companion measure, Proposition 4, known as the Gann Limit and named after Paul Gann, a conservative political activist who campaigned for it. The proposition imposed ceilings on state and local spending.

This year, with California awash in money, state political leaders face a rare Gann Limit problem. An estimated budget surplus of at least \$16 billion puts the state on track to exceed appropriation limits for two years in a row. This will almost certainly trigger Gann provisions, for only the second time ever. And it has added a dimension to annual budget considerations — looming battles over what to do with the extra funds.

In addition, Stark wrote, federal constraints have set parameters that "severely limit California's freedom of movement in reforming its tax system."

**SINCE AT LEAST THE 1930s**, California has relied on four main sources of revenue, says Daniel J.B. Mitchell, emeritus professor at Luskin and the Anderson Graduate School of Management. Personal income taxes, retail sales taxes and a corporate tax are the primary sources of money for the state general fund.

Personal income taxes account for about two-thirds of that total, Mitchell said in a telephone interview. All three taxes can fluctuate wildly with changes in the economy, leaving the state subject to cycles of boom and bust and prompting legislators to slash services in lean years and add programs in flush ones.

The fourth major tax, on real estate and collected by counties, funded most local governments and public schools until Proposition 13 rolled back rates sharply and made local services, especially schools, more dependent upon the state and subject to the ups and downs of state coffers. While the property tax certainly less volatile than the other major taxes, attempts to raise more money from it provoke such strong opposition that Proposition 13 has come to be known as the "third rail" of California politics — fatal if touched.

"So we have a very volatile tax system," Mitchell said. This year, with the state coffers overflowing because of an unexpected cycle of prosperity, budget fights are going to be about what to do with the surplus, he said. This is likely to include wide disagreement over how the Gann Limit should be interpreted.

Originally, the surplus funds were to be returned to taxpayers by a revision of tax rates or fee schedules, but the law has been amended to require splitting the overage 50-50 between schools and taxpayers. Another voter-approved amendment exempted certain categories from the spending-cap calculation.

In 1987, following the only time so far that the Gann Limit has been triggered, the Legislature and Republican Gov. George Deukmejian sent rebate checks to taxpayers. The amounts varied and were based on the state income taxes they paid during the previous year.

**THIS YEAR, PRECISE NUMBERS** for the expected surplus and appropriation limits will not be known until after projections are recalculated in May and a final budget for 2022-23 is adopted by the end of June. But debate around the expected windfall already has begun.

What are the options for using any revenue exceeding the spending limits? One is to give half to K-14 public schools and rebate the other half to taxpayers. The second part of this option is favored by conservatives and taxpayer organizations. But it is not likely to be embraced by the Democrat-dominated body politic.

The half not dedicated to schools could be used for public works projects, helping local governments, retiring debt or covering emergencies.

Gov. Gavin Newsom and many of his fellow Democrats hew to a wide interpretation of what constitutes a rebate. Newsom has proposed holding off on the next scheduled increase in the gasoline tax and spending on several social welfare programs, including providing health insurance for low-income residents and giving further financial aid to those most affected by COVID-19. He and his supporters say these are among ways to "give back" that do not include checks based on what someone paid in state income taxes. Budget decisions based on that view may be tested in court.

"It's sort of peculiar that this [Gann] initiative from 1979 is dictating the parameters of this debate," Stark said in a telephone interview.

The current revenue surplus allows the state to sidestep, at least for now, Stark's question about whether California can escape its taxation straitjacket. Moreover, both Stark and Mitchell credit a pair of ballot measures pushed by a pragmatic Democratic governor for giving the state a cushion against future lean years.

When Jerry Brown, a pragmatic Democratic governor, began his second eight-year stint as governor, the state was still recovering from the 2008 Great Recession. Part of Brown's legacy, Mitchell says, is his leadership in persuading voters to approve Proposition 30 in 2012, which temporarily raised sales taxes and income taxes on the wealthiest Californians, and Proposition 2 in 2014, which strengthened the state's mechanism for building a "rainy-day fund" to provide a buffer against drastic service cuts during years when the economy sours. (The

"California has been locked in stocks, suspended in mid-air from its ankles, and lowered into a glass tank overflowing with water."

— UCLA Law Professor Kirk J. Stark

projected amount in the Budget Stabilization Account, as it is formally known, is almost \$25 billion for the coming fiscal year, according to the state Legislative Analyst's Office.)

**STARK AGREES THAT BROWN** gave California some important breathing room but notes the governor did not change the basic tax structure that prompted Stark's straitjacket comparison.

"I do think the changes that Jerry Brown introduced were very significant," Stark said. "I do think this general approach is a very viable solution." But, he added, the rainy-day fund has yet to stand the test of time. Will there always be enough money for emergencies?

The state still has few options for increasing tax revenues should the need arise, he said, and some options, such as taxing medical services or groceries, are politically unpalatable.

"The people of California have demanded a very volatile tax system," Stark said. "We got the tax system we deserve." ▀



# Punching at Shadows

While right-wing media “debates” Critical Race Theory, UCLA Law teaches it — and has for decades

AT THIS ODD JUNCTURE OF AMERICAN LIFE, when many state and local governments are moving to stifle conversation around race in classrooms and beyond, UCLA’s law school is charting the opposite course, pioneering the use of Critical Race Theory to examine American race relations.

Critical race studies came to occupy a central place at the School of Law beginning in the 1990s. Since its inception, the program has touched hundreds of students, shaped countless conversations and debates and become what one professor, Devon Carbado, who joined UCLA’s law faculty as critical race studies was becoming established, calls “a transformative force.”

Jennifer Mnookin, dean of UCLA Law, agrees. Programs that teach critical thinking on race are “facile targets” in today’s politics, she said, and though it is tempting to laugh off some of the criticism, it must be taken seriously “because really substantial efforts are underway to impact the way people teach and talk about race.”

California stands as an outlier against that trend. Indeed, though California’s governance struggles are complex and sometimes disheartening, UCLA’s focus

on how to study and combat bigotry has placed the university and, more broadly, California at the vanguard of scholarship seeking to reckon with America’s plague of racial intolerance.

SINCE 2020, CRITICAL RACE THEORY has been the object of intense, if often misguided, national debate. Proponents, who include some of the UCLA School of Law’s most esteemed faculty members, as well as a generation of their students, see it as a useful tool for understanding American legal history. Its critics, many of whom have not bothered to examine Critical Race Theory in any detail, view it as a subversive method for turning young people against their country. Notably, those critics were largely silent until President Donald Trump weighed in on the topic.

Criticism of the theory — really, a method of legal and historical analysis — was spearheaded by then-President Trump, who issued an executive order on Sept. 22, 2020, just a few months before losing reelection, that did not name Critical Race Theory but attempted to challenge its underpinnings and sound an alarm about its impact. The order purported to “combat

offensive and anti-American race and sex stereotyping and scapegoating.” It warned that some beliefs about racial and sexual identity were a “malign ideology ... now migrating from the fringes of American society and [threatening] to infect core institutions of our country.”

A group of conservative lawmakers and their media allies followed the president’s lead. Nowhere was this more evident or more predictable than on Fox News. Although Critical Race Theory had been around and taught for decades, Fox News gave it little notice until the president issued his order. According to Media Matters, the network mentioned “Critical Race Theory” three times in June 2020; a year later, in June of 2021, the phrase appeared on its broadcasts 901 times. The trend has continued, and the theory is now a regular feature in Fox’s coverage of national affairs, ranking with allegations of election fraud and defenses of the defeated president.

WRITTEN BY

**JIM NEWTON**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY

**MIKE MCQUADE**

**S**  
**BLUEPRINT**  
**SPECIAL**  
**REPORT**  
A Closer Look



KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW,  
THE PROMISE INSTITUTE  
PROFESSOR OF HUMAN  
RIGHTS AT UCLA SCHOOL  
OF LAW.

To combat the perceived — some would say manufactured — threat posed by Critical Race Theory, Trump specifically barred teaching such ideas in the United States military. He also directed federal contractors not to engage in workplace training that relied on certain notions of racial identity or oppression.

Meanwhile, since the federal government does not educate many young people, Trump’s order had little immediate effect on American education, but it stoked a heated debate over the place of Critical Race Theory in American schools.

More than a year after Trump’s order, the Brookings Institution found that eight states had enacted laws banning classroom discussion of topics related to racial bias and oppression (with the exception of Idaho’s law, the states that have acted do not specify Critical Race Theory by name but rather attempt to describe and limit it). Another 15 states were considering similar bills, and a host of state and local school boards have acted. By the middle of 2021, an investigation by NBC found some 165 jurisdictions that were considering measures to restrict teaching Critical Race Theory or ideas akin to it. And the efforts have carried into 2022.



“We only get true racial progress when the interests of the dominant group come together with the interests of the oppressed.”

— LaToya Baldwin Clark, professor at UCLA School of Law

Typical of those is an executive order issued by Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin, who campaigned in 2021 on the promise of listening to the parents of school-age children. On taking office in 2022, he barred the teaching of Critical Race Theory, which he called “inherently divisive.” It was “Executive Order Number One” of the new administration.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY OFFERS A WAY of looking at history, most often legal history. It urges students to examine ways in which the law creates and defends racial hierarchies. That is not so different from programs that employ Freudian or feminist or economic lenses; in each case, a theoretical device becomes a prism through which to see events and institutions from a new perspective. Critical Race Theory, of course, centralizes that conversation around race, and this seems to make a significant difference, at least among those nervous about discussing a topic that touches some of America’s most objectionable history.

Critical Race Theory does not have a single creator, but the late Professor Derrick Bell is most often credited with its origination. Bell, a pioneering lawyer and civil rights advocate, spent his early years litigating to desegregate American schools, a project of the 1940s and 1950s that culminated in one of the most highly regarded decisions in the history of the United States Supreme Court. In 1954, the court unanimously voted to strike down school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

That landmark ruling, however, gave way to a long period of state and local resistance, which undermined the practical effects of the court’s constitutional proclamation. As he grew older, Bell’s early optimism about desegregation gave way to a more critical point of view: Racism, he argued,

was not a curable defect of American democracy but rather a fundamental condition.

In 1973, Bell published “Race, Racism, and American Law,” which put forward the argument that progress in American race relations was achieved in those rare moments when the interests of the White majority and those of Black people and other minorities converged. In that formulation, racial progress was not so much a matter of progress *per se* as it was of alignment.

Take school desegregation. Viewed through the prism of convergence, the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* is less an example of the justices coming to some flash of enlightenment — all nine justices who signed the opinion were White men — than it was of White and Black interests converging at that moment in the early 1950s.

This period was marked, among other things, by the growing tensions of the Cold War, in which racism played a significant role. The United States was competing with the Soviet Union for the allegiance of much of the world, particularly the developing world. Jim Crow laws that protected racist practices gave the Soviet Union a powerful point of argument on behalf of the superiority of Communism to American capitalist democracy. For a moment, Black interest in desegregated schools converged with White interests in Cold War advantage, and the result was *Brown*.

Under the theory of convergence, said LaToya Baldwin Clark, a professor of law who came to UCLA in 2018 in part because of its embrace of Critical Race Theory, “We only get true racial progress when the interests of the dominant group come together with the interests of the oppressed.”

That analysis also helps explain what happened in the era after *Brown* and what is

known as “*Brown II*,” the implementation ruling in which the court commanded that desegregation proceed with “all deliberate speed.” As scholars have noted, the result was much deliberation and little speed, with states intentionally impeding integration efforts and forcing dramatic confrontations with federal authorities. The consequence was glacial progress and even backsliding. In many parts of the United States, schools today are as segregated as they were before *Brown* was decided.

This caused Bell to doubt the potential of the law and highlights important aspects of Critical Race Theory. Among other things, the theory challenges the assumption that — as UCLA Law Professor Cheryl I. Harris, an important scholar in the development of the concept, says — “American law was self-correcting when it came to questions of racial discrimination.” It is not always self-correcting, as she and others have demonstrated, and the law’s progress on issues of racial justice is sometimes the result of outside forces.

Critical Race Theory is certainly not the only way to understand certain aspects of history. Even its application to school integration is subject to differing points of view. Does convergence, for instance, mean that the nine justices of the *Brown* court were acting with Cold War concerns foremost in their minds? If so, there is no written record to support that.

But do events in the aftermath of *Brown* support the idea that the breakdown of convergence led to the stalling of progress? Certainly, the answer is yes.

In other words, the convergence of ideas that allowed for *Brown* — White interest in Cold War advantage merging with Black interest in desegregation — diverged again after the court had ruled and the battle moved to implementation. By then,

Baldwin Clark said, “*Brown* had already served its purpose” by signaling to the world the U.S.’ commitment to desegregation; no such convergence existed around implementation, so the process stalled.

The specifics of such debates underscore the larger point of Critical Race Theory as a method of studying and teaching history and the law. Critical Race Theory opens new ways of approaching topics and understanding forces in American history and beyond; it helps explain how the *Brown* decision could be both so celebrated and so willfully ignored. As such, the approach surfaces important and provocative questions, even if it does not answer all of them.

Moreover, the method at work is not confined to one course or one subject. It shines light across multiple disciplines and ideas, in much the same way that law students study law and economics or law and philosophy.

“I teach first-year Property,” Baldwin Clark said. “I teach my class from a critical race perspective.”

UCLA DEVELOPED ITS PROGRAM in response to a “crisis,” said Professor Laura Gómez, one of the program’s founders. “The crisis resulted from the fact that in 1996, California voters passed what was known as Proposition 209.”

Proposition 209 abolished affirmative action in California. It affected programs throughout the state but its most pronounced implications were in education, where it prohibited state colleges and universities from using race to help guide hiring and admissions decisions. The debate over the measure and the statewide vote helped focus attention nationally on the question of race in education.

At UCLA, Prop. 209 led law school professors to confer about subjects they were



teaching independently and brought them together into a single program — the Critical Race Studies program. Students who joined the program did so to “study that which we know, which is the relationship between race, racism and the law,” said Kimberlé Crenshaw, another co-founder of the program, who holds the Promise Institute Chair in Human Rights at UCLA Law.

Although Critical Race Studies is solidly established at UCLA School of Law, the national debate continues, with critics seizing on the topic to pursue larger objectives.

The call to ban Critical Race Theory from public schools is less motivated by reality — no one is really proposing to teach Critical Race Theory to elementary school students — than by a broader discomfort with discussions of race and history at all levels. When the Wisconsin Legislature or a North Carolina school board considers barring teachers from discussing “social justice” or “equity and inclusion,” they are warning teachers to avoid the topic of race altogether.

The effect of those efforts, then, is to deflect or discourage frank discussions about such varied topics as the Japanese American internment or Jim

Crow laws or the genocide of native people. If critics can succeed in shutting down Critical Race Theory, then they will have gone a long way toward quelling those conversations as well.

This has implications for educators and students even in classrooms where Critical Race Theory is never directly employed. Imagine a teacher whose students want to talk about the murder of George Floyd or the significance of monuments to Confederate generals — lively topics both in and out of classrooms.

The effect of outlawing Critical Race Studies, said Baldwin Clark, is “to stifle any conversation about racism. And if you can’t talk about these things, that’s a problem.”

At UCLA, such criticism has not silenced educators. To the contrary, Mnookin said that she has sought additional funding to expand the law school’s Critical Race Studies program and is seeking contributions to expand it still further.

“We are proud of our program,” she said. “Rightly proud.” ▀

Here’s a link for more information about the Critical Race Studies program at UCLA: <https://bit.ly/38mjtrI>



# REFLECTIONS ON L.A. AND CA

ERIC GARCETTI  
ON CRIME,  
HOMELESSNESS,  
COVID AND  
*NINE  
EVENTFUL YEARS*

PHOTOS BY  
IRIS SCHNEIDER





**ERIC GARCETTI HAS SERVED** as mayor of Los Angeles since 2013, when he defeated Wendy Greuel in a campaign marked by heated disagreements over relatively small issues. Since then, he has presided over some of the city’s most sparkling achievements: He helped secure the 2028 Summer Olympics and presided over the passage of a transportation tax measure that is helping to correct one of the city’s most glaring deficiencies, a subway that bewilderingly fails to connect with the airport. He won accolades for shepherding Los Angeles’ much-admired response to COVID-19 while enduring scorn for two instances in which he was photographed without a mask during the Rams’ postseason appearances this year, an episode he mentions in this interview.

Elected on a pledge to focus on managing Los Angeles, Garcetti’s résumé reflects attention to detail, what he calls “back to basics.” He has, however, occasionally reached for bigger prizes, and with mixed results. Against the advice of many wizened political advisers, Garcetti took on responsibility for housing the region’s homeless and invested billions of dollars in the effort, only to see that population grow. He also inherited historically low levels of crime and fought to keep them that way, not always successfully.

Still, Garcetti has critics but few enemies. Congenial, articulate and gently self-deprecating, he is difficult not to like. Some fault him for failing to wield a heavier hand as a manager or dealmaker; some sense ambition behind his political calculations. But no one questions his intelligence or commitment to Los Angeles.

Garcetti and Blueprint’s editor-in-chief, Jim Newton, met more than 20 years ago at a basketball game hosted by then-Mayor Richard Riordan. Both Garcetti and Newton fouled the mayor during the game (Garcetti still insists that Riordan fouled him first). Garcetti went on to run for City Council in 2001, and Newton has covered his career in the years since. The two met most recently this spring in the mayor’s City Hall office, where this interview took place.



SAILING CARD FOR THE CLIPPER SHIP CALIFORNIA, DEPICTING SCENES FROM THE CALIFORNIA GOLD RUSH CIRCA 1850.

**BLUEPRINT:** I was thinking back to the 2013 race for mayor and wondered if you could reflect on that for a minute. Would you think back to what you heard from voters then about what they wanted from the city and then talk a little about how well you feel you’ve measured up?  
**ERIC GARCETTI:** Well, I’m going to say that I hate ... the whole “judge yourself” thing.

**BP:** Sorry, me too. I mean that less as judging yourself than reflecting on whether those hopes have been fulfilled.

**EG:** I sure hope so. ... I had a little open time today, and I started writing down what I thought, why I wanted to run [in 2013], what I wanted to do and what I remembered having said that I wanted to do. And it was pretty simple. I said I wanted City Hall to work again, and I wanted Angelenos to be working again. Going a little deeper, I wanted to get back to the basics, and the stuff I’d learned as a councilmember that people care the most about — their block, their park, their street, their call to DWP — that those things get done better.

And then, the second piece — we were coming out of a recession — was to make sure we were building the city of the future by focusing on longer-range economic prosperity for everybody.

So, looking back, on the first [aspect] ... I mean, there’s nothing more basic than streets. The year before I got elected, Bill Maher was complaining on his show about L.A. streets. That was a whole segment — his drive to the studio. And I looked at the stats, and there’s actually a rating you get for your streets, from zero to 100, and we had gone down for 30-plus years. Starting with my first year and every year since, we’ve gone up every single year, for the first time ever. You can still find some bad streets, but it’s not the obsession that it was. You don’t hear a lot about it because when you do your job right, you don’t get a lot of praise. Rightfully so, people believe that’s what city government should do.

**BP:** Nobody writes letters to the editor when they like stories, so I hear you.

**EG:** Exactly. “Great story! Awesome editorial! Keep going!”

There’s thousands of other examples. Since Riordan said we won’t raise taxes or rates on anything, DWP had been disinvesting in its infrastructure. We’ve more than doubled and tripled the pipes and the poles and just the basic infrastructure. Remember, it was the first year when the pipes burst over near UCLA. ... And even housing, where we had 40 years of NIMBYism. The pace has tripled — not like 10% — it’s tripled since I became mayor.

The problem with a lot of these things is if you do it right, it’s not an eight-year fix. It takes decades to get out of 40 or 50 years of not doing it right. ...

We built the largest reserve we’ve ever had, really responsible budgets. That first year had zeroes for DWP workers and at one point police

*“There’s the American Dream, and then there’s the California Dream. It’s not to say that people don’t dream in other states, but you never hear the phrase ‘the Kansas Dream,’ ‘the Texas Dream,’ ‘the Florida Dream.’ Californians, Americans and even people around the world have always known what the California Dream was. It was great weather, it was awesome jobs, it was good education and abundant housing.”*

officers, which had never been done. Everybody was saying our raises were out of control. Tough stuff to do, but I spent the capital on back-to-basics.

On building the city of the future, the key economics stuff, I also tried to spend my capital there. Measure M [a half-cent sales tax for transportation approved by voters in 2016]; the film tax credit at the state level, which I really pushed through to bring production back; aerospace investment; housing ... really trying to envision the future.

We never had a transit line to LAX — it was the biggest applause line of the campaign, even if people had never flown before. And now it’s rising like a Roman aqueduct.

**BP:** I remember talking with you about this more than 20 years ago. Even then, it was incredible that you could not take a subway to the airport.

**EG:** It’s insane.

One of the lessons I learned is that some of the small things are much tougher than you ever imagined, but some of the big things are easier than you’d ever think. ...

Why didn’t we have that there? Within the first year, we had put together the funding, the plan and the approvals. We still had to engineer it and do it, but that thing’s going to happen. I was like: Wait, did we just do that?

The Olympics took a little bit longer, but those things that I thought were the marquee to rebuild a city [were easier than expected].

**BP:** As I looked back at 2013, I was really struck at the kind of small-ball issues that dominated much of the coverage — the IBEW endorsement, campaign finance flareups. I felt a little squeamish reading it, frankly, because it feels media-driven.

**EG:** Never. That’s unbelievable. Not possible.

**BP:** Yeah, well, we’ll edit that out. ... More importantly, though, when you look back, not just at that campaign but at campaigning in this city generally, do the politics seem consistent



IMAGE BY G.F. NESBITT & CO., PRINTER





TOP: GARCETTI HOSTS A PRESS CONFERENCE TO CELEBRATE THE ONE-YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF THE LAUNCH OF THE “10,000 STRONG” VETERAN HIRING INITIATIVE. BOTTOM: GARCETTI ATTENDS AME CHURCH IN LOS ANGELES WITH THEN SEN. KAMALA HARRIS ON FEBRUARY 9, 2020.

GARCETTI HANDS OUT FREE LAPTOPS TO SOUTH LOS ANGELES RESIDENTS AS PART OF A CITY EFFORT TO BROADEN DIGITAL INCLUSION.



**with the job? Do you end up running on things that matter, or are you forced to run on things that don’t matter?**

**EG:** Well, I make a distinction: There’s the things you run on, and then there’s the things that define the race. So what I run on, absolutely. It’s your only chance to narrate. When you run for office, it’s your only chance to make the promises that then become 80% of what you’re going to do, at least in your first term. ... It’s locked in. You’ve said you’re going to do it. You should.

What a race is determined by, though? You never know. Everybody is saying right now that this race is going to be about homelessness and crime. Trust me: You don’t know what this race is going to be about until it’s about what it’s about. That can be very media-driven. It can be about somebody misspeaking. I didn’t think my race was going to be about Water and Power. In fact, I had worked very closely with and done very well with workers there, but because they chose a side, it became a defining issue. I became an outsider even though I had been working here for 12 years.

**BP: It was bizarre.**

**EG:** Talk radio was saying: We think they’re both communists, but at least he’s not bought and paid for by the special interests. My reaction was: OK, if that works.

Campaigns are their own beasts. You can try to push the beast in some direction, but usually the beast emerges on its own.

**BP: So let me ask you about a couple specific issues. Crime is up. There’s no disputing it. There were about 18,000 to 19,000 violent crimes in Los Angeles in 2012 [the year before Garcetti was elected], and there were about 30,000 last year; homicides similarly up from 296 or so to 397 last year. I’m used to [mayors] running on the strength of bringing down crime, and yet crime’s gone up on your longer watch. Why is that, and what do you have to say about it?**

**EG:** Well, somebody did a data crunch recently that this was the safest decade ... that we’ve had in L.A. That takes in a couple years before me, but it’s basically this period.

Couple things: One, we have some more honest numbers [LAPD audits in 2005 and 2009 found serious undercounting of assault data, with thousands of assaults being downgraded to minor incidents], so the increases in violent crime numbers are almost fully attributable to actually counting assaults as assaults and not gaming them as they were gamed before. I’ll take that hit. I’d rather have honest government than sugar-coated government.

The last two years are a particular skew on shootings and homicides. Other than that, we’ve actually had blips up and blips down, but because we’re at such a low number a little blip up registers as a higher percentage. It’s still in a trough.

**BP: Well, yeah, if you look back farther: 89,000 violent crimes in 1992. It’s nothing like that.**

**EG:** Those were crazy numbers. ...

It was one of the biggest challenges I faced at the beginning, one that we were able to slay. That challenge is there now, and we won’t be there for the two years to see its effect, but I hope that the next mayor will similarly slay this bump up. I remember it happened in 2014, we saw this bump up — a 15% increase in violent crime.

Today, we have nearly a million more patrol hours per year in the police department than when I started. ... So we increased patrol hours. ... We expanded our GRID work, our gang reduction work, by about 50% of geography covered. ... And we’ve concentrated in areas. We had public housing developments that used to have a murder every couple weeks [that] haven’t had a murder in a year.

We’ve focused a lot on moving toward what I call a kind of co-ownership of public safety, [which] I think is about to bear fruit and which has already started to. Amy [Wakeland, the mayor’s wife] was very involved in this. We took DART teams, Domestic Abuse Response Teams, and put them in every police division for the first time. Those are repeat calls and often tragic calls. We have SART teams, Sexual Assault Response Teams, and put them everywhere.

And then three new programs, arguably four: Didi Hirsh Suicide Prevention [Didi Hirsh Mental Health Services is a Los Angeles-based center created in 1942 to provide mental health and suicide prevention services], when you have cops that roll out to someone who’s suicidal and obviously results in a tragedy or they take their lives because they’re triggered or they’re trying to die by cop; cops [alone] don’t know the mental health stuff. Really successful. ... Second are our Circle Teams, which are in Hollywood and Venice now, responding to street homeless calls that used to go to 911 [and] are now going to peer counselors and others who walk those streets and know the folks. And then the Mental Health Vans, which began in January and [are] now in two, and soon to be five, parts of the city — 24/7 911 response for the 47,000 calls that LAPD or LAFD gets, and we think we can cover almost all of them [with the vans]. We’re paying for the driver and the real estate, and the county is paying for the clinician and the caseworker. In the first month, just in downtown, it used to be that 80% of those transports were to a hospital, where maybe they get held for three days but usually not and are back on the streets. Instead we are sending 72% into mental health care and only 20% into the hospital. ...

But to your larger question: Yeah, nationwide, we’re not an outlier. We’re a little bit lower in some cases. Homicides are up everywhere because people are armed, and we just had a pandemic, when people went stir-crazy.

*“Judging a pandemic is like judging a war, except that you don’t have a final declaration.”*

**BP: Homelessness. I remember when you were really setting out to do things on homelessness, thinking, uh oh, because this is hard — practically and politically.**

**EG:** I wish you’d warned me.

**BP: It does seem beyond the reasonable reach of almost any elected official, much less a mayor, so the incentive politically is just to avoid it. Obviously, you didn’t take that advice, which I’m sure others offered to you, and that’s to your credit. And yet, it has also, just by the numbers, gotten worse. There’s more of it in Los Angeles today than there was. How do you reflect on that? Was it smart to take on homelessness? Was it essential? Do you worry that you’re now responsible for the increase in homelessness?**

**EG:** I don’t worry that I’m responsible. I think it’s essential. And I don’t care whether it was smart. For me, it’s a core, motivating belief and area of focus of my entire life, and it will remain that way no matter what title I have.

I had a lot of advice — from my transition team, from smart journalists, from others — who said, “Don’t touch this. It’s a political loser. And it’s impossible for mayors.” People don’t understand that the city doesn’t have the causes-in or the cures-out.

**BP: Right. I mean, you don’t do social services and you don’t do mental health, so how are you going to fix this?**

**EG:** Exactly. And we don’t have the foster care system or others. We do have some responsibility on zoning and housing, and we can be powerful advocates, and I sought to be the second. Just before the pandemic, I gave a speech where I accepted responsibility for solving homelessness. People didn’t hear the nuance. [They concluded]: “Oh, he’s to blame for homelessness.” No. We’re all to blame for homelessness. Put the mirror up to each and every one of us — each time we said no to

housing being built in our neighborhood, allowed a mental health care system to fall apart, didn’t treat veterans or foster youth as we should have...

**BP: Or voted for lower taxes ...**

**EG:** It’s a collective responsibility. But we need people who run to the fire, and I ran to that fire, and I don’t regret it even if it means sometimes getting burned. Somebody has to put it out. ...

I’m proud of what we have in place. Not proud in the sense that we’ve solved homelessness or that the numbers got so great on the streets. Proud in the sense that for the first time, we didn’t have state money for homelessness. We didn’t have a city budget on homelessness. So let’s just

take those two. The city budget [on homelessness], if you really wanted to stretch it — it was really zero — but we could call it \$10 million. In this year’s budget, it was \$1 billion.

I know the next question: “If it’s a billion and it still isn’t working...”

**BP: You beat me to it.**

**EG:** I don’t buy that, and I’ll you why... [The state once regarded homelessness as a purely local problem, but now contributes.] Still not high enough, in my opinion, but the state has skin in the game for the first time.

On the federal level, when President Biden asked me to co-chair his campaign, he said:



GARCETTI IS JOINED BY POLICE CHIEF CHARLIE BECK AND SNOOP DOG AFTER A POLICE AMBUSH IN DALLAS.



“What do you want?” And I said the only thing I want is that you’ll promise me one thing in your platform, that you’ll look at developing over time, or doing your part to develop over time, a right to housing.

Think about it. We don’t let people starve in America. It doesn’t matter how many of us are hungry. We all get food stamps if we need them. We don’t have people go without health care in America. The poor, the indigent don’t go without it, thanks to Medicaid, which we call Medi-Cal. No limit. ...

Every country that’s solved homelessness, and I’ve looked deeply into this, has two things: They have a functioning mental health care system, and they have a right to housing that takes those who are on the streets and offers them housing. Full stop. ...

Everything that people asked for — Get a ballot measure? That’s never been done. It will never pass. We did it. Get a second one? Worked on that one at the county level. Got it. We need inclusionary zoning or a linkage fee. We got that passed. Build some shelters? How many do you want? Five? We got 27 of them. ... What about tiny home builds? Great. We got 13 and another three coming, including the largest in the country. Safe parking? Not enough of them, but a bunch of safe parking sites.

Whatever you want, I’m never going to be the guy who says we didn’t get it because we didn’t try it. ...

I had a teenager follow me around a while ago, and he asked me to boil down to four words where homelessness comes from. I said, Can I have five? Meth, tents, trauma, high rent ... Not that everybody who’s on the street is on meth, not that everybody’s in a tent, but in some combination, we have those issues.

Never before did we have groups buying people tents. On one hand, it’s really great; on the other hand, it cocoons people, makes them much more resistant. People did drugs. We had crack, etc., but this meth that’s out there right now is making people psychotic, or they’re using it to treat their psychosis if they had a pre-existing one. Our rents have never been so high. And [then there is] our collective trauma, between sexual abuse and domestic violence, war, the foster care system.

I am truly optimistic. I saw what we were able to do in Venice, in Echo Park, in MacArthur Park, now around here in the Civic Center area. It’s really tough. It’s hand-to-hand. There are a lot of people who have a stake in keeping the status quo on both sides of the spectrum, on the extremes, but I think we’ve cracked the code of how you do it. The question now is: Can you stick with it long enough and build enough housing at the same time, advocate for the mental health care system? ...

I’m pretty optimistic that we’ve seen the worst, and it would have been a lot worse without these things. And that’s the last thing I’d say to people who say, “You’re throwing all this money, and still



MAYOR GARCETTI HOLDS A PIECE OF THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE, BELOW. “IT’S WHAT I WON WHEN WE BEAT THE GIANTS IN THE ONE-GAME PLAYOFF IN 2021.”



PHOTO BY STEPHEN LEONARDI / UNSPLASH

*“It’s a collective responsibility. But we need people who run to the fire, and I ran to that fire, and I don’t regret it even if it means sometimes getting burned.”*

nothing’s happened?” Trust me: If we didn’t have these things, it would have been that much worse.

I don’t care whether this was the good thing to do politically. It’s the right thing to do.

**BP: Correct me if I’m wrong, but I’m going to assume that the biggest surprise of your tenure was COVID. I certainly didn’t see that coming...**

**EG:** Oh, no, I predicted that: “We’re probably going to get a pandemic. Probably from Wuhan.” No one knew what I was talking about, but I kept saying, “Wuhan, trust me. It’s going to be a big deal.”

**BP: Well, huge marks for you personally and for the city early on. You were among the first to recognize and respond to this, but you also faced some difficulty emerging from it, and I won’t belabor your issue with not wearing the mask during the NFL playoffs....**

**EG:** Ugh. I’ll shoot myself in the head.

**BP: Obviously, COVID was a huge crisis that you didn’t have any reason to brace for. Looking back on it, did it go as well as it could have, better than it could have? What’s your appraisal?**

**EG:** Judging a pandemic is like judging a war, except that you don’t have a final declaration. But I’m so proud of Los Angeles. I’m so proud of the city. I’m so proud of the actions that we collectively took. There are probably tens of thousands of people who are alive today who wouldn’t have been. Tens of thousands. That’s a life well-lived if we did nothing else collectively.

We’ll never be able to count the living. We can only count the dead. But we were the first city to close things down. We were the first city to mandate masks. We were the first city to test people without [symptoms]. We were the first city to go into our skilled nursing facilities. We were the first city to take the African American deaths that were double the population in other places and bring them under the represented population. It showed the very best of L.A.

I’ve always said that leadership is defined not by the things you say you are going to do and set out to do and how well you do them. Leadership is defined by what you don’t expect to happen and how well you respond. By that measure, I’m proud of what we did here. ...

It was unlike anything we’ve experienced in our lifetimes. And mobilizing \$75 million in donations before the federal government was there, making the pitch to the Trump White House and successfully getting cities added to the coronavirus relief funds. ... We spent all our reserves and maxed out all of our credit cards, and we had no idea where tomorrow we would get the next dollar.

It was the most profound leadership lesson I’ve ever had. I call them the four “ates”: accelerate, collaborate, innovate, communicate. On that last piece, I read somewhere. ... that the chief responsibility of a leader is to communicate relentlessly in a crisis. That’s why I started doing those evening addresses.

It was superb working with this governor, superb working with my fellow mayors.

**BP: Looking ahead over the next five to 10 years, what do you see as the major challenges facing not just Los Angeles but all of California? How do you govern this place going forward?**

**EG:** California has really one fundamental challenge, which is: How do we get out of the way to be a more frictionless government and economy? How do we take all our well-intentioned laws that have piled up like a bag of stones, each one beautiful but way too heavy to carry anymore, and build more housing and infrastructure?

The top three issues for both city and state? They are housing, then housing and then housing.

There’s the American Dream, and then there’s the California Dream. It’s not to say that people don’t dream in other states, but you never hear the phrase “the Kansas Dream,” “the Texas Dream,” “the Florida Dream.” Californians, Americans and even people around the world have always known what the California Dream was. It was great weather, it was awesome jobs, it was good education and abundant housing.

We still have great weather. We still have great jobs. Higher education is still very good, though we have our K-12 challenges. ... But that last one, housing, it’s killing the idea of the California Dream. I think CEQA [the California Environmental Quality Act, which permits lawsuits to block construction on environmental grounds] is a part of that.

**BP: This is a special test for Democrats, right?**

**EG:** It can only be led by us. We Democrats, who control the state, have to be the ones who push back on ourselves. Individual needs can’t outweigh the collective need to make sure this state doesn’t strangle itself.

And it isn’t good enough to say we’re outpacing Texas, which is true, or that L.A. is leading every city in America on job growth [also true]. We’re No. 1, double the pace of California and better than every city, including all the Texas cities, New York and Chicago, on job growth out of the pandemic, and in the valuation of our companies.

But how much more could we be doing? And if you have any honest conversation with anyone who’s planning their life here, unless they’re already super-rich or too poor to move, people are thinking [about options].

**BP: And you can’t tell people that they’re well off, right? They either feel it or they don’t.**

**EG:** We’re rich in all sorts of things that other people don’t have. In the weather, in the geography, in the events that are here, in the sports championships...

**BP: I’m a Giants fan. Don’t get me started.**

**EG:** Oh, I’ll get you started. [Garcetti goes to his shelf and pulls down a heavy piece of cable, mounted on a stand.] This is a piece of the Golden Gate Bridge. It’s what I won when we beat the Giants. See, it says “GGB.” One of my proudest wins.

So, we’re rich with those sorts of things, but you’re right, it’s a tougher city and state to live in than it’s been in a long time. It’s not that it’s not better than other places. It still is. It’s this imperfect paradise, but our imperfections are much more keenly felt. ...

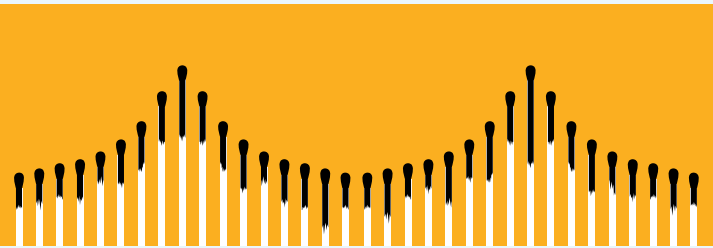
This is a liberal city in a liberal state, but we’ve mostly been libertarian. Build me freeways and get me water, and we’ll take care of the rest.

**BP: And that’s what makes this a hard problem for Democrats, right? There’s nobody else to blame if this doesn’t work.**

**EG:** Absolutely. And I think we’ll remain. I don’t think we’re going to lose power. It’s just a question of what do you want to look back on. Did you retain power? Or did you make life better? ➤



# CLOSING NOTE: GOVERNING THROUGH CHANGE



**NOW THEN, TO THE QUESTION:** Is California governable? The research and analysis featured in this issue make it clear that California faces enormous challenges. It is a huge and changing place — one where immigration and internal growth are altering the demographic landscape, where some voters feel shoved aside, where a state budget surplus exists alongside crying need, where many communities live in fear and are wary of those charged with their protection.

This embraces a tough set of issues. They range from the most abstract to the most tangible, from the right to cast a meaningful ballot to the reasonable expectation of being protected by the police. These and other issues within this comprehension have generated academic interest and calls for reform. Can California’s tax system be changed to mitigate its wild swings from shortfall to surplus? UCLA professors Kirk J. Stark and Daniel J.B. Mitchell are among those asking that question and offering recommendations.

So deep are some of California’s dilemmas that reforms once intended to protect it from special interests — the referendum, initiative and recall — now are firmly under the control of those very interests. More than a century after launching direct democracy, California is struggling to regain it, and leaders are debating how to do so. Meanwhile, the state confronts these questions under the permanent stress of change. When California Progressives brought their safeguards for democracy into force in the early

1900s, they won on the strength of men’s votes; women were excluded. It was the Progressives who changed this, and in 1911, California men approved Proposition 4, granting women the right to vote. That doubled the electorate, but it remained overwhelmingly White through much of the 20th Century.

Writers Lisa Fung and Jon Regardie show, however, that the change afoot in modern California — a foreshadowing what’s in store for the rest of America — is enlarging notions of how to live, work and participate here. This state’s largest ethnic group now is Latino/as, followed by Whites, Asians and Blacks. Desperate to hold onto a shrinking base, some of those being swamped by demographic trends have resorted to gerrymandering and voter suppression, battlegrounds examined by Fung and Regardie — whose pieces look at work by Professor Natalie Masuoka, Professor Matt Barreto and others. Voter registration to overpower such suppression is exemplified by the activism of Jason Berlin, profiled in this issue by Molly Selvin.

It is the nature of social science that issues explored by Blueprint often are lived and researched at the same time. That’s no exception here, and there is no more basic aspect of life than safety. In pursuit of security and well-being, lawmakers and researchers are working to develop better ways of responding to persons in crisis; this effort is chronicled by writer Robert Greene, who takes stock of endeavors in Los Angeles and elsewhere to equip police and social service workers with the tools they need to resolve such crises peacefully.

Our articles and the research and experiences they present do not paint a picture of a placid or simple place. California is the most populous and diverse of American states, a nation-state ever poised at the leading edge of what is new. Managing its challenges overwhelms some leaders but causes others to rise to the occasion. It brings out the best — and the worst — in its inhabitants. It’s not always an easy ride. But is California governable? Yes. — *Jim Newton*



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