



WHAT'S SO CRAZY ABOUT CALIFORNIA POLITICS?

by Robert L. Woodbury

Throughout much of the nation, California politics is viewed as a political carnival. A variety of political cults, extremist groups, erratic voting behavior, candidates from an unreal world, and a year-round, bumper-sticker war fascinates, baffles, and amuses much of the country. Sometimes it even embarrasses Californians.

This image is spread and sustained by the national press. Note the titles of recent articles on California politics: "Notes from the Land of Political Pop," "Political Fun and Games in California," "Tom Sawyer Enters Politics," and "The Land of

Loony Schemes and Political Extremes." An old joke about California politics can still be heard in respectable places in the East: "Tilt a continent and all the oddballs will roll with the tilt."

The laughter of the rest of the nation, however, is a nervous one—and for good reason. Candidates who can win statewide elections in the nation's largest state instantly become potential presidential and vice-presidential candidates. The New York lesson is lost on few. In all but two presidential election years since 1872 at least one of the two major parties placed a New Yorker on the national

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ticket. Further, there is considerable apprehension east of the Rockies that patterns emerging in California may be a curtain raiser for their own politics.

It could hardly be disputed that California's political history has been dotted with color and variety that has repeatedly attracted the attention of the national press. The depression of the 1930's produced a variety of cure-all plans and demagogues, as well as radical reform programs that excited uncommon support. The Technocrats and the Utopian Society blossomed, as did political counterparts of religious cults of the Aimee Semple McPherson variety. The Townsend Plan calling for a \$200-a-month allotment to every person over 60 on the condition that the money was spent within three months flourished in California, as did the "Ham and Eggs" scheme that appeared on the 1938 state ballot.

Less popular political movements—ranging from the John Birch Society to the 1961 Organization to Remove (Arthur) Schlesinger from Public Life—have appeared on the fringes of California politics throughout the 20th century.

But the overriding conclusion about the political experience of California in this century is not the erratic character of its politics but how closely it has paralleled the national experience. The dominant response of California to business power and corruption early in the century; the convulsions of war, prosperity, and depression in the intervening years; and the emerging problems of a rapidly growing mass urban society after World War II are more coincident with the national experience as a whole than that of almost any other state. California's most successful political leaders for over half a century have clearly occupied the broad mainstream of our national political life.

The progressive period provides a good example. Throughout the nation after 1900, the progressive sought greater public supervision of business activities, popular electoral reform, and greater legislative attention to those who were casualties of a maturing nationalized economy. Although the movement came late to California, it rapidly duplicated the national experience. Theodore Roosevelt called the 1911 California legislative session "the most comprehensive program of constructive legislation ever passed at a single session of an American Legislature."

Nor did California stray from the main route after the progressive period. The era of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover was slightly more progres-

sive, both in California and elsewhere, than historians have previously concluded; but the state nevertheless duplicated the dominant national pattern of a "return to normalcy," popular suspicion of stepped-up governmental activity, and the consistent election of Republican leadership.

During the depression decade of the 1930's, California did not elect a New Deal governor until 1938, but it did follow a pattern of increased Democratic success and moderate reform. The shift of the focus of governmental activity to Washington was an experience common to statehouses across the country.

Since World War II California has virtually defined the mainstream political response to the problems of a rapidly growing, increasingly urbanized, affluent society. One need go no further than Earl Warren for the story of moderate progressive adjustment to the demands of a complex urban society.

To argue that for 60 years California has followed, and more recently duplicated, the national political experience as a whole does not mean that California politics hasn't responded to any distinctive factors.

Several elements peculiar to California politics are quite familiar: the repeated antagonism between north and south; the important role of the Mexican-American, Oriental-American, and increasingly the Negro-American communities in the life of the state; and a vigorous urban-rural clash that is being replaced today by a much more crucial split between the suburbs and the core city. But even these distinctive elements are nationally relevant and increasingly describe the experience of many states.

Three other distinctive factors deserve special attention. First is the independent character of California voting behavior, which is partly a legacy of the progressives and partly due to a variety of sociological factors such as the role of migrants from other states. No other state so institutionalized popular participation and voter independence during the progressive period. One example, cross filing, has been eliminated, but the result has *not* been the evolution of strong party organizations nor have voters become less independent. It is also true that ticket splitting and weakened party ties increasingly describe voting behavior elsewhere.

A second factor of considerable importance in California political history is rapid population growth, fed by continued high migration. This growth has created elements of instability and bur-

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geoning social problems that have not quite been duplicated elsewhere. The rate of population growth in California has been almost constant for a century. If this rate continues, however, California's population will equal that of the United States by the year 2070.

A third important factor is the implication of the cliché that California is more like a nation than a specialized sub-political unit. A highly diversified society and the sixth most productive economy in the world cause California politics to be involved in a far more complex myriad of conflicting interest groups and problems than exist in a state where groups such as the dairy farmers or the automobile workers can exert effective leverage. Even this characteristic, however, suggests why California politics has so closely approximated the national experience, and the reality of diversified economies is increasingly apparent in many states.

These distinctive factors—rapid growth, a highly diversified society, independent political behavior, the impact of urbanization—have affected the path of California politics for decades. But these factors appear less distinctive when compared with the nation as a whole and, as other states increasingly respond to similar pressures, these factors may buttress our understanding of California's place in the mainstream of American politics.

It is true that the prominent role of the zany, extreme, and unorthodox in the story of California politics in the 20th century cannot be ignored. It can, however, be placed in some perspective. First, California has had no monopoly on extremists or nuts. In fact, a man like Upton Sinclair, the EPIC candidate for governor in 1934, would rate rather low on any zaniness scale with the likes of Jimmy Walker, Huey Long, and Ma Ferguson.

Second, the national press often features a story of the offbeat when it comes from California and underplays a more extreme demonstration elsewhere. For decades Americans have somehow seen California as "the nation becoming." This not only made any article on California more important but created a climate where people almost had to have an excuse for not migrating themselves.

In the light of California political experience in the 20th century, we have little reason to expect that the state has suddenly moved off into some eddy of United States politics in the 1960's.

In a society like ours politics is the major public arena where the tensions, hopes, aspirations, and in-

terests of people are expressed. As societies change, constituencies and their interests change, and the substance of politics will change also.

Important changes *are* taking place in American society today, and we may expect a new politics. "The United States," Peter Drucker wrote two years ago, "almost certainly is entering into a period of political turbulence unlike anything we have known for at least a generation. In the decades just ahead, our domestic politics will be dominated by unfamiliar issues—not only new, but different in kind from the things we have been arguing about since 1932." Drucker has suggested a model that is particularly applicable to California.

First, the United States has become an urban nation. Within a few years, 75 percent of all Americans will live in less than 200 urban centers across the country; 40 percent will live in or on the fringe of three giant urban belts—one stretching from Boston to Norfolk, one from Milwaukee to Cleveland, and one extending almost without interruption from San Francisco to San Diego. The case of California is particularly dramatic. According to the Census Bureau, almost 90 percent of Californians today live in urban areas.

Second, the United States is more and more a "Youth State." The median age in the U.S. today is 26 and still declining. In 1960, the median age was 33. It has dropped one year annually over the last seven years. Those of us who are baffled by the youth generation have reason to be worried: the 15-24 age group is now 30 percent of our population. In the 1968 presidential election, 14 million young people who were too young to register in 1964 will be able to vote. The group with the power to lay down the law will not be 40- and 50-year-old businessmen, lawyers, laborers, and housewives, but young adults pushing baby carriages or still attending school.

Third, we are not only a Youth State, but a "Knowledge State." By 1970, one-third of our nation's population will be in school full time. We currently spend well over 30 billion dollars on education, and this figure will probably double in the next five years. Not only will a large majority of Americans be students or parents of students, but the coalition of their concerns will be joined by another huge power group—those directly involved in the education business as teachers or administrators. Even today they make up the largest single occupation group in the United States. Few of us

need to be reminded that California is already the Knowledge State par excellence. We will soon have close to a million students enrolled in institutions of higher education. At the lower educational level we already have a million more students than New York State, although the state populations are equal.

What does all this have to do with a so-called new politics? It simply means that new groups, with new concerns and interests, are coming to the center of American politics and that some of the power groups which defined the issues over recent decades will decline in importance.

Peter Drucker has suggested that this new power group will consist of "a professional, technical, and managerial middle class—very young, affluent, used to great job security, and highly educated . . ." They will live in the megalopolis and work for large and amorphous public or private bureaucracies. Assured of salaries of \$15,000 and more, they will also be politically untied, secure, eager to use leisure, concerned with the quality of life in the urban-suburban complex, and intimately concerned with the educational system. They will not be captured politically by resurrecting the issues and the ideological warfare of the 1930's or even the 1950's.

Constituents of this future power group, such as the students at Caltech, have grown up in an era of uninterrupted prosperity. Already we see their challenge to traditional concepts of work, leisure, occupation, material measures of status and worth, and other values laid down in an older America. The form of the challenge may range from psychedelic withdrawal to service in the Peace Corps. More likely, it will be reflected in a persistent uneasiness about their commitment to managerial, professional, and technical careers and family life in the latest Leisure Village. To say that this generation will eventually turn out like its predecessors may be comforting, but if it turns out *not* to be true, it may have some astounding political implications.

In California this new power group has already begun to emerge, and some of their political concerns are apparent. To people living in the great megalopolis, the key issues are increasingly smog, water pollution, regional government, crime, and urban renewal. To a youth society intensely concerned about education, issues of campus size, the ghetto school, technological innovations in teaching, and student power are more and more becoming dominant political concerns.

But there is also a more complex ingredient in this so-called new politics. By older definitions the affluent young professionals of this new power group should have it made. But they are an uneasy and anxious lot. The individual is caught up in a

mass society where people are numbered; where his face is not known; where his position in an amorphous bureaucracy is unclear; where a string of credit cards is his introduction, but everyone has the same cards; where he lives in a tract home—a world where the traditional definitions of place, position, status, occupation, class—of identity—do not exist. He *should* have it made, but no one recognizes him on the street and tells him that he's important, that he's a community leader, that his advice is crucial, that he has really achieved.

Perhaps something is wrong. Who or what is to blame? Is it Negroes who are pushing too fast? Is it ungrateful students at Berkeley? What about crime in the streets, or Communists, or soft judges, or people on welfare, or the decline in morals?

These concerns and anxieties are no less real than were those of job insecurity for a laborer, or hog prices for a farmer, or income for a retired couple during the 1930's; but they introduce a far greater complexity to our understanding of politics. Politics *was* easier in a time of economic scarcity and insecurity when political parties could offer more well-defined programs directed primarily at economic interests. But what happens to politics when economic interests are joined or obscured by anxieties involving status or by concerns not directly linked to income or job security? What political program is appropriate in these circumstances?

The people in this new power group *are* ambivalent. On the one hand, they respect the political leader who, like themselves, is a managerial type: competent, skillful, and technically knowledgeable. On the other hand, they have real anxieties not rooted in economic interests that are no less important socially or politically. Social scientists have begun to use the term "status politics" to describe the political expressions of resentments and uncertainties that are no less real but considerably more difficult to transcribe into a specific political program. In any case, the role of status politics cannot be ignored in any outline of the new politics.

If my portrait of the new issues, new power groups, and new battlegrounds of American politics—and the social changes underlying them—sounds familiar, it should. The shift is already well under way in California. These issues did not form the mainstream of California politics two decades ago, and they are only now influencing the politics of the rest of the nation. California is now, for better or for worse, suggesting the direction of domestic American politics in the coming decades.

"What's So Crazy About California Politics?" has been adapted from a talk given by Robert L. Woodbury, Caltech assistant professor of history, at the 30th Annual Alumni Seminar on April 22.