

FOURTH EDITION

# CALIFORNIA POLITICS

A PRIMER



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## Introduction

California could be considered one of the ten largest countries in the world. Only six or seven other nations had a larger gross domestic product than California in 2014, and its \$2.3 trillion economy rivals those of Italy and Brazil.<sup>1</sup> With a population nearing 39 million, the state boasts 4 million more people than Canada.<sup>2</sup> As many billionaires live in California as in Russia; only China and the United States have more.<sup>3</sup> Its territorial spread includes breathtaking coastlines, fertile farmland both natural and human-made, deserts, the highest and lowest points in the continental United States, dense urban zones, twenty-one mountain ranges, and ancient redwood forests—a resource-rich expanse with boundaries that could accommodate a dozen east coast states.

California sparks global trends, and national and world events permeate—and sometimes temporarily overwhelm—the state's politics. Immigration, climate change, drought, terrorism, pandemics, worldwide economic tides, and wave after wave of other factors push and pull on those who make policy decisions for one of the world's most diverse political communities. Unlike most democratic governments, however, elected officials share the responsibility for policymaking with ordinary Californians who make laws through the initiative process at the state and local levels. This **hybrid political system** (a combination of direct and representative democracy) provides an outlet for voters' general distrust of politicians and dissatisfaction with representative government but tends to promote decision making without compromises.

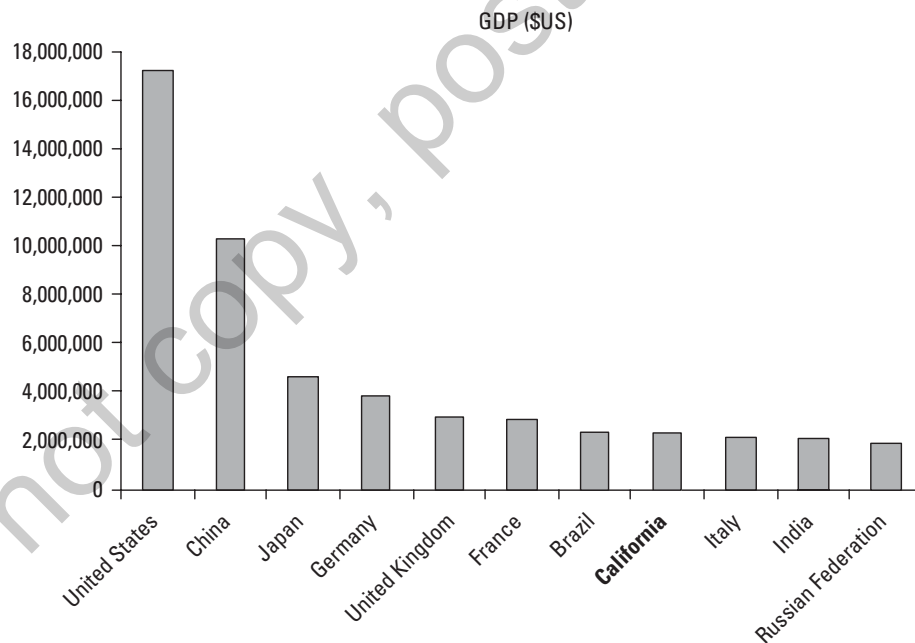
If **politics** is a process through which people with differing goals and ideals try to manage their conflicts by working together to allocate values for society—which requires bargaining and compromise—then California's system is vulnerable not only to failures of governance but also to repeated attempts to fix what's perceived as broken. Over the last hundred-plus years, the initiative process has permitted voters, wealthy corporations, and interest groups to perform a series of historical experiments

on the state's political system, from restyling elections to retuning taxation rates to rebooting the legislature's membership through term limits. Some of these reforms, which are discussed throughout this book, are celebrated as triumphs. Proposition 13 in 1978, for example, deflated ballooning property tax rates for homeowners (now limited to 1 percent of the property's sale price) and arrested rate increases, an arrangement that voters guard watchfully to this day.

Reforms also tend to produce unanticipated consequences that demand further repairs. Property owners may covet the low property tax rates that Prop 13 guarantees, but it has led to chronic underfunding of education and heavy reliance on user fees for public services, as well as unequal tax bills across every neighborhood. Local governments still face a backlog of critical infrastructure projects that continues to swell along with the population. Meanwhile, citizens' loathing of taxes and their exasperation with politicians persist.

California's bulging population ensures that public issues exist on a massive scale. More than one of every eight U.S. residents lives in California, and one of every four Californians is foreign-born. When economic recession hit in the mid-2000s, multibillion-dollar budget gaps were commonplace and reached a high-water mark of \$27 billion under Governor Schwarzenegger. Deficits were patched through gargantuan loans, the placement of state workers on unpaid leaves (furloughs), and the slashing of state services. Unemployment rates exceeding 12 percent outstripped the

**FIGURE 1.1** Gross Domestic Product, 2014 (in millions)



**Sources:** World Bank, "Gross Domestic Product 2014," World Development Indicators Database, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, "BEARFACTS: GDP for California," <http://www.bea.gov/regional/bearfacts/action.cfm?geoType=3&fips=06000&areatype=06000>.

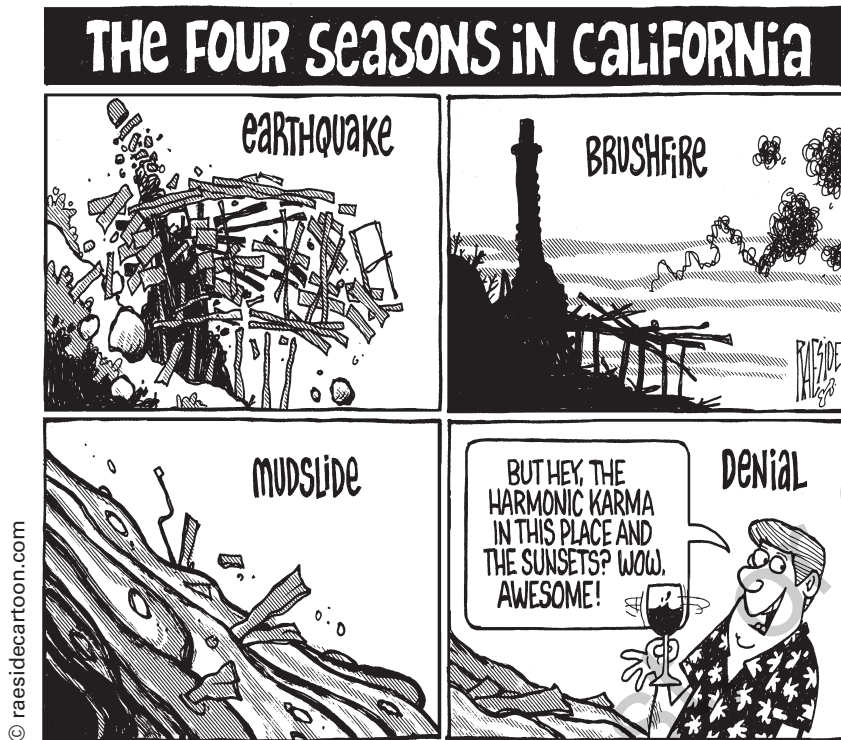
national averages.<sup>4</sup> Now, even though the economy is on the upswing, 85 percent of Californians continue to describe unemployment as a serious problem in 2015, and half (50 percent) of Californians describe the state's economy as being in bad times rather than good (only 33 percent are optimistic).<sup>5</sup> Prisons remain overcrowded by tens of thousands of inmates, although incarceration rates have shrunk from all-time highs by federal court order as many nonviolent criminals have been shifted to county jails and paroled.

Drought, long-term and pervasive, has gripped the entire state, and heavy rains are unlikely to erase all its impacts. In 2014, California became the last state in the nation to require local management plans for groundwater, and not long after, Governor Jerry Brown mandated 25 percent water usage cutbacks for counties and cities. The state was also contending with an 11 trillion-gallon deficit caused by rain- and snowfall shortages,<sup>6</sup> painfully visible in cracked-earth river basins, bathtub-type rings created by falling lake levels, and an almost nonexistent Sierra Nevada snowpack that is arguably the state's most critical reservoir, the main source of the southland's water. Overpumping of groundwater is causing land to sink faster than ever, a phenomenon called *subsidence* that buckles roads, irrigation canals, bridges, and pipes, costing state and local governments millions to fix.

Mandatory restrictions have spurred close examinations of water rights belonging not only to all drought-stricken western states but also to three separate rights-holders within the state: the *environment* (restoring or sustaining habitat, ensuring water quality, and so forth, which guzzles half of the state's water), *people*, including individual consumers and companies, and *agriculture*. Media stories have sensationalized ongoing battles over water allocations from the complex Sacramento–San Joaquin River Delta estuary located east of San Francisco, which feeds farms in the Central Valley and is also diverted to protect a unique environment in which endangered species such as a small fish called the Delta smelt subsist. Reports have spotlighted growers who replenish the nation's breadbasket but purportedly use 80 percent of water used by humans and businesses and pay far less for the lower-quality water they use, further annoying residents who feel that local water agency restrictions on urban consumption are unfair. Farmers point out that food safety should come first: "We have to feed families, but we don't have to golf."<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, local water agencies are busily devising ways to incentivize conservation and penalize higher water consumption by urban users.

The availability, cost, distribution, storage, and cleanliness of freshwater represent a fraction of the complex, interrelated issues that state and local elected officials deal with year-round. Drought is merely one dimension of climate change, a large-scale phenomenon that also intensifies the risk of wildfire; affects whether California can produce the wines and food that the world enjoys; alters delicate ecosystems; and invites invasive pests that carry infectious diseases—all of which have impacts on human health, affordable housing, and employment, to name just a few areas of concern for policymakers. Californians also face a daunting list of challenges brought about by natural population growth and immigration, as deteriorating infrastructure in the form of sewers, roads, bridges, storm drains, water storage and treatment facilities, aging schools, and jails compete for the public's limited attention and money. Current infrastructure needs are estimated to exceed \$500 billion.<sup>8</sup> These policy issues, along with other pressing challenges, are catalogued in the concluding chapter.

Water scarcity also highlights how different interests compete through the political process to get what they want. Governing officials must balance private and public interests, and they work hard to fix problems experienced by their constituents—a job that also requires them to balance the needs of their own districts against those of their city, county, or the entire state. This grand balancing act is but one reason California politics often appears irrational, but, like the U.S. government, the system



was designed that way, mostly through deliberate choice but also through the unintended consequences of prior decisions. California's crazy quilt of governing institutions reflects repeated attempts to manage conflicts that result from millions of people putting demands on a system that creates both winners and losers—not all of whom give up quietly when they lose. As happens at the federal level, state officials tend to respond to the most persistent, organized, and well-funded members of society; on the

other hand, losers in California can reverse their fortunes by skillfully employing the tools of direct democracy to sidestep elected officials altogether.

### Principles for Understanding California Politics

It may seem counterintuitive given the depth of its problems, but California politics can be explained and understood logically—although the results of the process are just as often frustrating and irresponsible as they are praiseworthy and necessary. In short, the fundamental concepts of **choice, political culture, institutions, collective action, rules, and history** can be used to understand state politics just as they are used to understand national or even local democratic politics. These concepts are used throughout this book to explain how governing decisions are made by Californians or on their behalf and to provide a starting point for evaluating California's political system: does it work as intended? Do citizens have realistic expectations about what problems government can solve, the services or values it provides, and how efficiently or cheaply it can do so? How do we measure “successful” politics?

We begin with the premise that **choices** are at the heart of politics. Citizens make political choices explicit when they decide not to participate in an election or when they cast a vote, but they also make implicit political choices when they throw aluminum cans in a recycling bin or send their children to private schools. Legislators' jobs consist of a series of choices that involve choosing what to say, which issues to ignore, whose recommendations to take, which phone calls to return, and how to word a law or cast a vote.

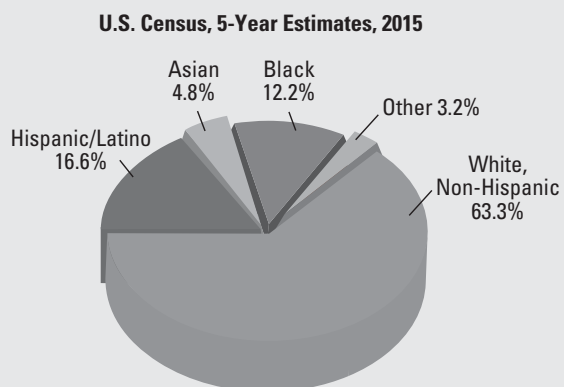
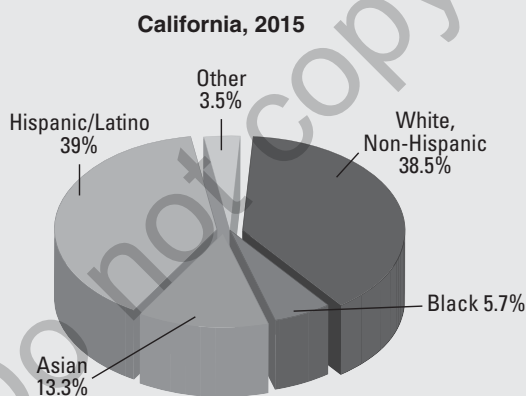
## BOX 1.1 Comparative FAST FACTS on California

	California	New York	United States
<b>Capital:</b>	Sacramento	Albany	Washington, DC
<b>Statehood:</b>	September 9, 1850 (31st state)	July 26, 1788 (11th state)	Declared independence from Great Britain July 4, 1776
<b>Number of U.S. House members:</b>	53	27 (-2 from 2000)	435
<b>Number of counties:</b>	58 (since 1879)	62	50 states
<b>Largest city by population:</b>	Los Angeles, 3,957,022*	New York City, 8,175,133**	New York
<b>Total population:</b>	38,715,000*	19,746,227**	318,857,056**
<b>Percentage of foreign-born persons:**</b>	27.0	22.1	12.9
<b>Median annual household income:**</b>	\$61,094	\$58,003	\$50,502
<b>Percentage of persons living below poverty level:**</b>	15.9	15.3	15.9

\*California Department of Finance, "California Grew by 358,000 Residents in 2014," press release (May 1, 2015), [http://www.dof.ca.gov/research/demographic/reports/estimates/e-1/documents/E-1\\_2015PressRelease.pdf](http://www.dof.ca.gov/research/demographic/reports/estimates/e-1/documents/E-1_2015PressRelease.pdf). The U.S. Census Bureau estimated the figure to be 38,802,500 as of July 1, 2014.

\*\*Current U.S. and New York population figures based on U.S. 2010 census, monthly population estimates as of July 1, 2014. U.S. Census Bureau, American FactFinder, "Monthly Population Estimates for the United States as of July 1, 2014," [http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community\\_facts.xhtml](http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml). Income, national origin, and poverty rates based on U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 3-year estimates, accessed June 2015.

### Ethnic Makeup of California:



**Sources:** California Department of Finance, "Report P-2: Population Projections by Race/Ethnicity, and 5-year Age Groups, 2010–2060" (December 2014), <http://www.dof.ca.gov/research/demographic/reports/projections/P-2>. "Other" includes Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, American Indian, and "more than two races." U.S. figures from U.S. Census Bureau, American FactFinder, based on American Community Survey, 2009–2013 five-year estimates.

In large and diverse societies that are crammed with people who are motivated by different goals, interests, and values, a successful political system provides a process for narrowing choices to a manageable number and allows many participants to reconcile their differences as they make choices together. The decisions that emerge from this process express the customs, values, and beliefs about government that a society holds and give that political system a distinct culture—a **political culture** that varies from state to state. Three of the features that define California’s political culture are a historical fondness for reforming the political system, a preference for Democratic officials but general detachment from political parties, and an aversion to politicians—themes that will resurface throughout this book.

Political systems also facilitate compromises, trade-offs, and bargains that lead to acceptable solutions or alternatives. **Institutions** help organize this kind of action. Political institutions are organizations built to manage conflict by defining particular roles and rules for those who participate in them. In short, they bring people together to solve problems on behalf of society. Democratic elections are a good example: there are rules about who can vote and who can run for office, how the process will be controlled, and how disputes resulting from them will be resolved. Through institutions like elections, **collective action** (working together for mutual benefit) can take place. The same can be said of other institutions—such as traffic courts and political parties—for in each, people work together to solve their problems and allocate goods for a society.

Rules also matter. **Rules** define who has power and how they may legitimately use it, and rules create incentives for action or inaction. For instance, in the legislature, a majority political party must cater to the minority party’s demands in order to secure a few decisive votes when a two-thirds supermajority vote is required, whereas they can choose to ignore the minority when simple majority rules are in place.

Rules are also the results of choices made throughout **history**, and over time a body of rules will change and grow in response to cultural shifts, natural disasters, scandals, economic trends, and other forces, creating further opportunities and incentives for political action. Enormous economic tides that define eras (think “The Great Recession” or “The Great Depression”) exert especially powerful forces in politics because behemoth governments are not designed to respond nimbly to rapid and unanticipated changes; budgets and programs are planned months and years in advance, with history providing clues to decision makers about probable developments. Sudden readjustments, particularly those made in hard times, will reverberate far into the future.

Thus, recognizing that both choices and the rules that condition them are made within a given historical context goes a long way toward explaining each state’s distinctive political system. A state’s political culture also contributes to that distinctiveness. These are the elements that make New York’s state government so different from the governments of Nevada, Georgia, and every other state, and we should keep them in mind as we consider how California’s governing institutions developed. In essence, a unique set of rules, its culture, and its history are key to understanding California politics. They help explain the relationship between Californians and their government, how competing expectations about “successful” politics propel change, and why elected officials tend to have such a hard time running the state.

For years, online bloggers to *New York Times* editors opined that California was on that brink of collapse, that it was “ungovernable,” but Governor Jerry Brown has snuffed out those critiques as balanced, on-time budgets have materialized on his watch, and budget surpluses have mounted—facts that certainly affirm the importance of a strong economy but also solid leadership, both of which have contributed to his generally high approval ratings (58 percent in mid-2015, ratings he has maintained since late 2013).<sup>9</sup>



David Paul Morris / Stringer

The steps of the state capitol in Sacramento serve as the location where California governors are sworn into office at least every four years and provide a daily stage for public rallies and demonstrations.

It remains to be seen whether Brown is merely holding a tidal wave of problems at bay, as debts pile up (see chapter 8) and deferred maintenance projects accumulate. The people's general discontent with politicians and politics also handicap government's capacity to solve the state's pressing problems, address piecemeal decisions of the past, and hinder representatives' ability to plan sufficiently for the future. Still, Californians' hope that things can be better motivates them to keep testing the limits of their political machinery. Moreover, Brown has demonstrated that political leadership is possible and he has originated his own brand of "successful" politics. This book explores the reasons for the contemporary state of affairs and pushes the reader to ask what successful politics requires, whether those conditions are present in California, and what it will take to enable California's government to serve the public's interests effectively, comprehensively, and sensibly over the long term.

## Notes

1. See Jason Sisney and Justin Garosi, "2014 GDP: California Ranks 7th or 8th in the World," Legislative Analyst's Office, July 1, 2015, <http://www.lao.ca.gov/LAOEconTax/Article/Detail/90>. See also World Bank, "Gross Domestic Product 2014," World Development Indicators Database, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, "Interactive Data" (state GDP, TOTAL industries number), <http://www.bea.gov>.



2. The Department of Finance estimated the total population to be 38,715,000 on January 1, 2015. Source: State of California, Department of Finance, *E-1 Population Estimates for Cities, Counties and the State with Annual Percent Change—January 1, 2014 and 2015*, Sacramento, California, May 2015.

3. Dan Alexander, “California Leads All States (and All but Two Countries) with 111 Billionaires,” *Forbes*, March 7, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/danalexander/2014/03/07/california-leads-all-states-and-all-but-2-countries-with-111-billionaires>.

4. The seasonally adjusted rate was 12.2 percent for February through April, 2010. Rates were 12.7 percent in California for January 2010, versus 10.6 percent in the same month nationally. Sources: California Employment Development Department, “Unemployment Rates (Labor Force), 2000-2015,” California Employment Development Department, <http://www.labormarketinfo.edd.ca.gov/cgi/dataanalysis/labForceReport.asp?menuchoice=LABFORCE>, and Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey,” U.S. Department of Labor, August 24, 2015, <http://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000000>.

5. Mark DiCamillo and Mervin Field, “Release #2508,” *The Field Poll*, May 28, 2015, <http://www.field.com/fieldpollonline/subscribers/Rls2508.pdf>. Respondents in this report were a randomly selected subsample of 1,664 California adults, with a total response subset of 478 registered voters; the poll’s margin of error was  $\pm 4.6$  percent. Interviews took place April 23–May 16, 2015.

6. “NASA Data Underscore Severity of California Drought,” NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory, California Institute of Technology, December 14, 2014, <http://www.jpl.nasa.gov/news/news.php?feature=4412>.

7. Quoted in Jesse Marx and Ian James, “Farm Water Use Comes Under Scrutiny,” *The Desert Sun*, April 20, 2015, <http://www.desertsun.com/story/news/environment/2015/04/20/farm-water-use-comes-scrutiny/26076211>.

8. Jose Cisneros, “California’s Crumbling Infrastructure: An Urgent Priority,” League of California Cities, *Western City Magazine*, February 2014, <http://www.westerncity.com/Western-City/February-2014/PresMsg-CA-Crumbling-Infrastructure>.

9. Mark DiCamillo and Mervin Field, “Release #2507,” *The Field Poll*, May 27, 2015, <http://www.field.com/fieldpollonline/subscribers/Rls2507.pdf>. The respondents were 1,664 California adults, including 1,044 registered voters; interviews took place April 23–May 16, 2015. The poll’s margin of error was  $\pm 3.2$  percent.