Introduction

As if the State of California weren’t exceptional enough, it could be considered one of the largest countries in the world. Only five other nations had a larger gross domestic product than California in 2016, and its $2.6 trillion economy rivals those of France and India.1 With a population nearing 40 million, the state boasts 4 million more people than Canada.2 California houses more billionaires than in Hong Kong and Moscow combined.3 Its territorial spread includes breathtaking coastlines, fertile farmland both natural and human made, one of the globe’s hottest 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 1,100 miles of coastline and an area that could accommodate a dozen east coast states.

California’s reputation for being the “great exception” among the American states has intensified since the political journalist Carey McWilliams characterized it that way in 1949. The state is an exaggeration; it sparks global trends, and national and world issues permeate the state’s politics. Immigration, climate change, civil rights, terrorism, pandemics, economic tides, and waves of social issues 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 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 and enables the electorate to reshape it over time. 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 especially vulnerable to repeated attempts to fix
what’s perceived as broken, and parts of it may be periodically upended. For more than 100 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 rebooting elections to retuning taxation rates to refashioning the legislature 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. On the other hand, direct democracy tends to promote all-or-nothing solutions that have been fashioned through a process devoid of bargaining and compromise, two hallmarks of democratic lawmaking.

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’ general disdain for taxes and politicians persists.

California’s bulging population ensures that public policy 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—the largest percentage among the states. Among them are approximately 2.5 million undocumented immigrants. Prisons have shrunk by tens of thousands over the last few years as, under federal court order, many nonviolent criminals have been shifted to county jails and paroled, but California’s criminal population is second only to that of Texas in size, with over 130,000 in custody and another 50,000 under some form of correctional control. In 2010, just over 10 percent of the population was over age 65; that percentage will double by 2030.

Extreme weather events merely reinforce California’s distinctiveness. After five long years of drought, during which time California confronted the driest winter in 500 years with desperate conservation efforts, storms in 2017 replenished the Sierra snowpack, filling those reservoirs to 190% of normal in one of the wettest winters on record. Ski season in the Sierra Nevada mountains extended into August. The lasting effects of drought, however, can be seen in the state’s stricken forests, where more than 100 million dead trees have elevated the risk of both erosion and wildfires that can transform whole regions into catastrophic infernos. It’s also visible in the continued overpumping of groundwater that has caused 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. The detrimental effects of flooding are also painfully apparent in infrastructure failures such as the Oroville Dam, whose spillways buckled under torrential rains in 2017 and ultimately will cost about $500 million to restore.

The drought may have ended, but the fights over water that continue to rage are unlike those anywhere in the United States. Farmers in the Central Valley are jockeying for the same water that helps feed Southern California, and they are pitted against environmentalists over how much flow should be diverted to replenish the failing Delta ecosystem, the complex Sacramento–San Joaquin River Delta estuary located east of San Francisco. Meanwhile, Governor Brown has endorsed the building of 35-mile-long, four-story high “twin tunnels” to send Sacramento River water underneath the imperiled Delta to the South and inland farms, at a cost of an estimated $16 billion (to be covered by water users, not the state). This controversial project, named California WaterFix, whose price tag is three times the size of many states’ entire annual budgets, demonstrates the magnitude of issues in
California. WaterFix has absorbed decades of planning, would require at least a decade of construction, and involves government agencies at all levels. It directly affects major sectors of the state, from industries such as agribusiness to the environment to 25 million residents, among them powerful stakeholders who want either to kill, reshape, or advance this project in ways that will maximize their own interests. In fall 2017, water agencies responsible for financing the project began to pull out of the deal, possibly dooming it to failure. The project demonstrates the hazards of shifting from the status quo when big money and high-powered interests are at stake.

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, a pile of “to-do’s” that grows unceasingly. Water-related concerns are merely one dimension of climate change, a large-scale phenomenon that also intensifies wildfires, alters delicate ecosystems, spawns invasive pests that carry infectious diseases, and affects whether California can produce the craft beer, wines, and food that the world enjoys. Californians also face a daunting list of sustainability challenges brought about by natural population growth and immigration, while deteriorating roads, bridges, storm drains, water storage, sewage treatment facilities, schools, and jails compete for the public’s limited attention and money. Developing new affordable housing, expanding broadband access, and installing infrastructure for zero-emissions vehicles are also on the state’s wish list. Current infrastructure needs are estimated to exceed $500 billion, and waiting to make repairs merely increases the bills as problems worsen.

over time.\(^9\) (Formidable public policy issues such as these are catalogued in the concluding chapter.)

Whether the goal is reducing college fees for students or restricting offshore oil drilling, different interests compete through the political process to get what they want. Governing officials weigh private against public interests, and generally 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 politics often appears irrational and complex, but, like the U.S. government, California's system was designed that way, mostly through deliberate choice but also through the unintended consequences of prior decisions. California's puzzle 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 complexity of its problems, but California politics can be explained and understood logically—although political outcomes are just as often frustrating and irresponsible as they are praiseworthy and necessary. In short, six fundamental concepts—choice, political culture, institutions, collective action, rules, and history—can help us understand state politics just as they help us understand national or even local democratic politics. These concepts are employed throughout this book to explain how Californians and their representatives make governing decisions 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, and how does California's political system compare to others?

*Choices: At the Heart of Politics.* Our starting point is the premise that choices are at the heart of politics. Citizens make *explicit* political choices when they decide not to participate in an election or when they cast a vote, but they also make *implicit* political choices when they send their children to private schools or refill a water bottle instead of buying a new one. Legislators' jobs consist of a series
### Comparative FAST FACTS on California

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<th>California</th>
<th>Texas</th>
<th>United States</th>
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<tr>
<td>Capital</td>
<td>Sacramento</td>
<td>Austin</td>
<td>Washington, DC</td>
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<td>Statehood</td>
<td>September 9, 1850 (31st state)</td>
<td>December 29, 1845 (28th state)</td>
<td>Declared independence from Great Britain July 4, 1776</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of U.S. House members:</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>435</td>
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<td>Number of counties:</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>50 states</td>
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<tr>
<td>Largest city by population:**</td>
<td>Los Angeles, 4,042,000*</td>
<td>Houston, 2,100,000</td>
<td>New York, 8,175,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total population:</td>
<td>39,542,000*</td>
<td>27,862,596</td>
<td>323,127,513</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage of foreign-born persons:***</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
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<td>13.4%</td>
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<td>Median annual household income:**</td>
<td>$61,818</td>
<td>$53,207</td>
<td>$53,889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of persons living below poverty level:**</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
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### Ethnic Makeup of California:

**California, 2015**

- Hispanic/Latino: 39%
- White, Non-Hispanic: 38.5%
- Black: 5.7%
- Asian: 13.3%
- Other: 3.5%

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.

**Political Culture: Collective Attitudes and Beliefs about the Role of Government.** 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 and customs that emerge from this process generally express the attitudes, beliefs, norms, and values about government that a political majority holds and give their governing system a distinct culture—a *political culture* that varies from state to state. As compared to Texans or Nevadans, Californians tend to be more willing to regulate businesses in favor of workers and the environment and to offer public programs that include those at the margins of society. Three other features that define California’s political culture are a historical fondness for reforming government through ballot measures, a preference for Democratic officials but general detachment from political parties, and a willingness to use state regulatory power—themes that will resurface throughout this book as we examine California’s exceptionalism.

**Institutions: Organizations and Systems that Help People Solve Collective Action Problems.** 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, enabling the official use of power and authority. Election systems 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; in each setting, people work together to solve their problems and allocate goods for a society. It should be noted, however, that the use of power and authority through political institutions can benefit some and harm others; fair and equal outcomes are not automatically ensured through democratic institutions.

**Rules: Codes or Regulations Defining How Governing Power May Be Used.** Rules also matter. Rules are authoritative statements, codes, or regulations that define who possesses the power to govern and how they may legitimately use it, and rules create incentives for action or inaction. Rules are framed in constitutions; they may be expressed as laws or in administrative rules, executive orders, or court opinions, for example. Unwritten rules, also known as *norms*, also guide behavior, and daily interactions help enforce what is expected and acceptable, as reflected in the degree of civility among politicians. For instance, in the legislature, if one party reaches supermajority status (as was the case in 2016 when Democrats controlled both houses), the minority party is rendered virtually powerless because their votes are not needed to pass special bills or taxes that require approval by two-thirds of the membership.

**History: The Past Helps Set the Terms of the Present.** 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, influential leaders, natural disasters, scandals, economic trends, and other forces—some gradual,
some sudden—creating further opportunities and incentives for political action. Enormous economic tides that define eras (think “The Great Recession” or “The Great Depression”) exert especially disruptive 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 Oregon, Georgia, and every other state, and we should keep them in mind as we consider how California’s governing institutions developed, and whether California belongs in a class of its own. 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 can have a hard time running the state.

For years, online bloggers to New York Times editors opined that California was on the brink of collapse, that it was “ungovernable,” but those critiques faded as the economy improved, bond debt was reduced through accelerated repayments, and balanced, on-time budgets materialized on Governor Jerry Brown’s watch. Through mid-2017, state government had regained some of the people’s trust, with about half of adult Californians approving of the legislature’s job (51 percent) and about 55 percent believing that the state was going in the right direction. Approval ratings are always subject to change, however, and loathsome tax increases—such as the 12-cent per gallon increase in the state gas tax enacted by SB1 in 2017—pose direct threats to legislators’ popularity.

Californians resemble most Americans in their general aversion to politics and feeling overtaxed, and yet they have found new ways to distinguish themselves from the rest of the country. More than 61.7 percent of Californians voted for Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in 2016, repudiating candidate Trump (only Hawaii was higher, at 62.2 percent). California is among the first states to legally recognize a third gender option, enabling persons who identify as intersex to mark “X” instead of male or female on official documents. California was the first state to legalize marijuana use for medical purposes in 1996 but behind several states in 2016 when voters approved its recreational use. In defiance of Trump administration policies that are perceived to be anti-environment, state lawmakers and city leaders have fortified carbon emissions standards, invested more in “green” energy, and recommitted to combating climate change through subnational agreements such as Under2MOU, an agreement forged by a group of regional leaders who are committed to keeping climate change under 2 degrees Celsius. Dissenting with the Trump administration on immigration, they have denounced a proposed border wall, filed lawsuits on behalf of “Dreamers” (children who were brought to the United States illegally and grew up in the country without formal legal status), provided state funds to defend undocumented immigrants in federal deportation proceedings, and barred state and local governments from using personal information to create religious registries of any kind. Most controversially, they declared the state a “sanctuary” for nonviolent, noncriminal undocumented immigrants. As a sanctuary state, local and state law enforcement officials are prohibited from expending their resources to help federal agents enforce deportations with certain exceptions. Public safety considerations were built into the sanctuary state law signed by Jerry Brown in 2017, such that local police have discretion to hold violent felons...
for federal authorities, immigration agents may interview jailed individuals, and certain database information may be shared with immigration agents. Otherwise, state officials will not aid the Department of Homeland Security in targeting undocumented persons—such as parents, students, and children—for removal from the United States. In response, federal officials have vowed to withhold federal funds from California should it continue to resist national arrest and deportation policies—a penalty that became less likely when a federal judge in late 2017 blocked President Trump’s executive order to deny funding to sanctuary cities.13

These livewire issues demonstrate that federal versus state power is once again on the table, foretelling continued clashes that will test constitutional principles and citizens’ understanding of good government. Californians’ abiding hope that things can and should be better also motivates them to keep testing the limits of their political machinery through the initiative process—even if their general discontent with politics tends to handicap government’s capacity to solve the state’s pressing problems. They, like Carey McWilliams who wrote nearly 70 years ago, believe that “nothing is quite yet what it should be in California.”14

The Golden State remains a land of mythical proportions, set apart from the rest by its commanding economy, geography, and population. Yet, the question begs to be answered: how extraordinary are California’s politics? This book explores the reasons for the contemporary state of affairs and evaluates how history, culture, institutions, and rules contribute to the sense that California is exceptional. Generations have reimagined and brought its distinctiveness to life through their choices and actions, and collectively they have created a political system that at first glance seems incomparable in all its complexity, experimentation, and breadth. In this book we ask whether California is a justifiable outlier, a state whose politics defy simple categorization. Along the way, we also consider what it will take to enable California’s several forms of government to achieve the foundational aim of a democratic government: to serve the public’s welfare and interests effectively, comprehensively, and sensibly over the long term.

**Key Terms**

- **collective action**: working together for mutual benefit. (p. 6)
- **hybrid political system**: a political system that combines elements of direct and representative democracy. (p. 1)
- **institutions**: systems and organizations that help people solve their collective action problems by defining particular roles and rules for those who participate in them and by managing conflict. (p. 6)
- **norms**: unwritten rules that guide acceptable or expected behavior, enforced through daily interactions. (p. 6)
- **political culture**: the attitudes, beliefs, and values about government that a majority in a state hold, as expressed in their customs and the political choices its citizens and leaders make. (p. 6)
- **politics**: a process of bargaining and compromise through which people with differing goals and ideals try to manage their conflicts by working together to allocate values for society. (p. 1)