

The State of Electoral Democracy in California

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I. Executive Summary

As a racially, economically, linguistically, and geographically diverse state facing challenges from climate change to housing and homelessness, California has emerged as a bellwether for the future of American democracy.

This report analyzes the health of California's electoral democracy over the past quarter-century. Using the State Democracy Index (SDI), a systematic quantitative measure of democratic performance, we find that:

- ◆ California's electoral democracy score increased from slightly above average in the 2000s to the 6th highest performing state as of 2023.
- ◆ The increase in California's democratic performance was driven by the creation of an independent redistricting commission that drew balanced legislative district maps, as well as the implementation of automatic voter registration, universal mail voting, and other reforms that expanded access to voting.
- ◆ Despite its important improvements, California's electoral democracy faces challenges related to the speed of counting votes, a complex ballot initiative process, and uneven participation in local politics.

California serves as a compelling case for understanding broader dynamics in American democracy. Over the past decade, voters and policymakers have taken deliberate steps to expand voting access and engage citizens in decision-making processes, such as through citizens-initiatives. The outcome of these efforts are reflected in this report and in the state's improved democratic performance since the 2000s, as measured by the SDI.

California is also useful as a comparison to other states. The SDI, which covers 2000 to 2023, uncovered significant democratic backsliding in a number of states in the 2010s (see media coverage of the SDI in [The Economist](#), [FiveThirtyEight](#), [The New York Times](#), and [Vox](#)). California's experience in recent decades illustrates both the challenges and the promise of American democracy in the 21st century.

II. Introduction

As a racially, economically, linguistically, and geographically diverse state facing challenges from climate change to housing and homelessness, California has emerged as a bellwether for the future of American democracy.

California's electoral democracy has transformed over the past quarter century. Once a middling performer in the 2000s, the state has more recently emerged as a U.S. leader in electoral democracy. The expansion of electoral democracy in California was driven by a series of reforms that included automatic voter registration, universal mail-in voting, voting rights restoration to formerly incarcerated felons, and the establishment of an Independent Redistricting Commission. These efforts have both broadened democratic engagement and challenged the state to address political inequalities, adapt to climate pressures, and serve as a 'laboratory of democracy' by experimenting with reforms to make elections freer, fairer, and more secure. In light of recent actions under the Trump Administration, particularly efforts to consolidate authority at the federal level, the role and effectiveness of state governance have become increasingly vital.

This report tells California's story using the State Democracy Index (SDI). The SDI is a quantitative measure of the health of electoral democracy in each of the 50 states. Using indicators that assess the cost of voting, partisanship within legislative districts, election accessibility, and other aspects of election administration, the SDI highlights how U.S. states have experienced democratic expansion and democratic backsliding over the past 20 years (Grumbach 2022; Grumbach and Bitton 2024). Using the latest SDI data from 2023, we find that California's democratic performance has improved significantly since the early 2000s, catapulting the state from slightly above-average to one of the top performing states by the early 2020s.

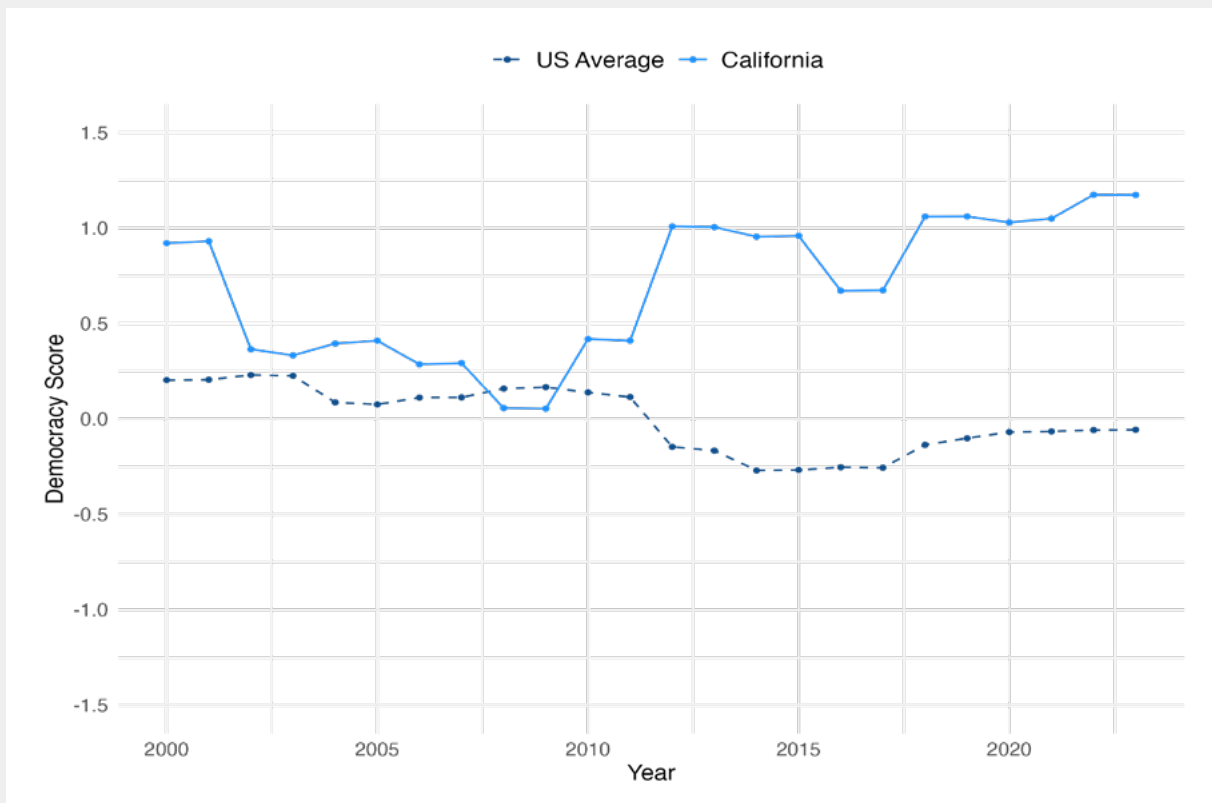
In this brief, we trace the history of California's success since the 2010s, the moment at which its story began to shift, and uncover the lessons, challenges, and opportunities facing electoral institutions across the country.

III. SDI and California's Democratic Performance

The SDI, which covers the years between 2000 and 2023, is based on 54 democracy indicators. Each democracy indicator is a measure that tells us something about how effectively citizens in each state can influence policy outcomes through the electoral process. Democracy indicators include, for example, whether a state automatically registers its citizens to vote, or if felons have voting rights after serving their criminal sentences. Democracy indicators also measure how balanced or skewed a states' legislative districts are, as gerrymandered legislative maps insulate politicians from the will of the voters.

Importantly, we, the researchers, do not determine how much a given democracy indicator matters for a state's democracy score. The SDI lets the data speak for itself. In technical terms, we use a Bayesian factor analysis model to estimate a 'latent' democracy variable, which represents a state's democracy score for a given year. The model produces a single democracy score for each state-year that best predicts the real patterns of the 54 democracy indicators in our data.

Figure 1: Electoral Democracy in California and the 50 States



How is California doing according to the SDI? Turning to Figure 1, we can see that California's democracy score has fluctuated since the early 2000s. Noticeably, California's democracy score declined between 2000 and 2009 (from 0.92 to 0.05). This decline was driven by a modestly higher level of partisan imbalance in its U.S. House and state legislative district maps following the 2000 redistricting cycle compared to the 1990 redistricting cycle (McGhee and Krimm 2015; PlanScore). However, in 2008, California created an Independent Redistricting Commission which led to more balanced maps for the 2010 redistricting cycle. The state also passed a series of reforms that expanded access to voting in the 2010s. Collectively, these efforts contributed to the state's higher democratic performance, with California's score rising to 1.17 in 2023.

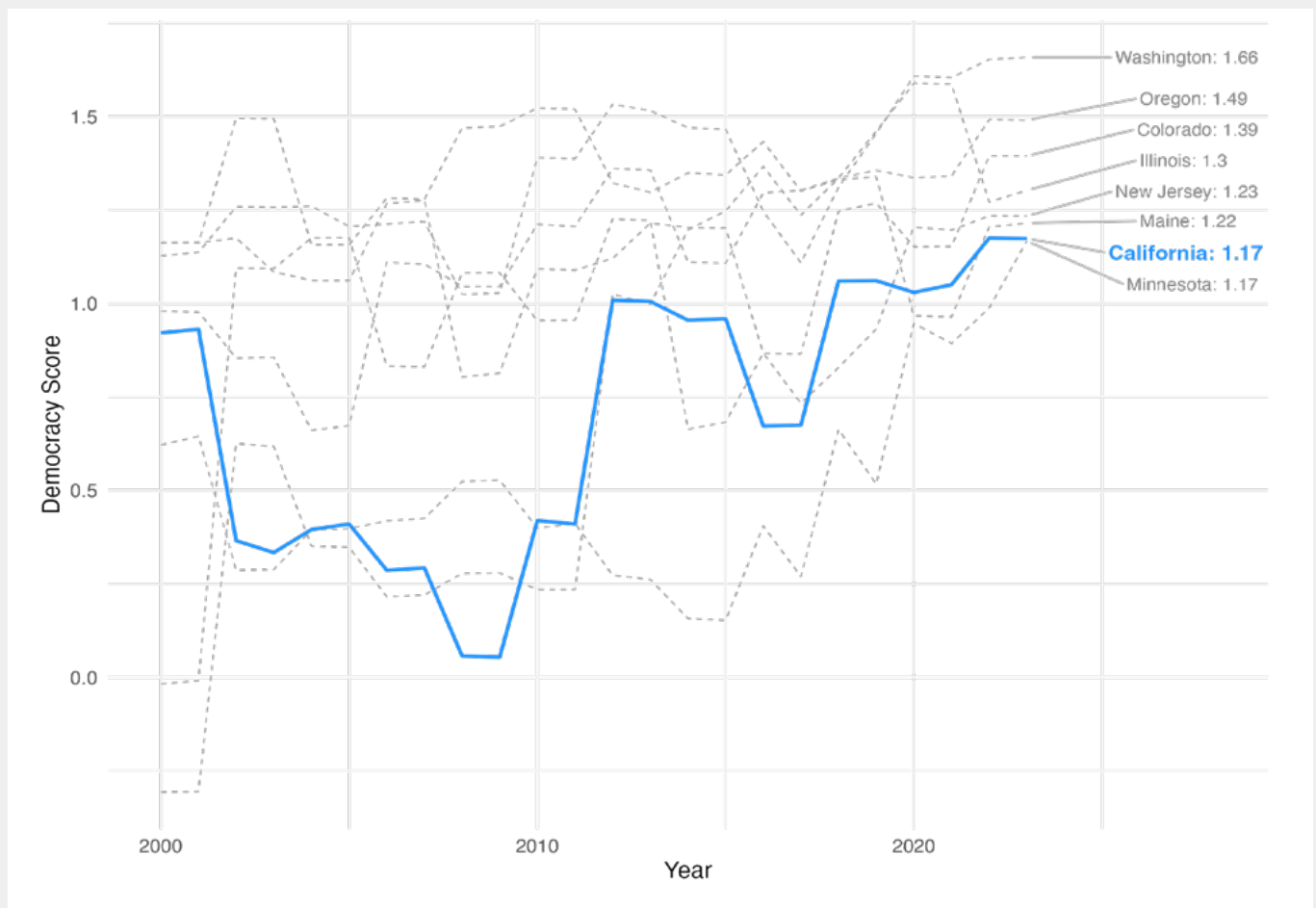
Table 1: Electoral Democracy Progress by Period

	US Average	California	California Rank
2000 to 2009	0.16	0.40	17th
2010 to 2019	-.133	0.822	11th
2020 to 2023	-.062	1.11	6th

Table 1 shows California's trajectory since the 2000s in conjunction with the U.S average. Between 2000 and 2009, the average state democracy score was 0.16, compared to California's average score of 0.4 during that same period. With this score, California ranked 17th nationally in democratic performance, placing it within the top 35% of states based on average scores during this period.

Between 2010 and 2019, the U.S. state average dipped even further to -0.13, while California increased its average to 0.82, which subsequently moved California to the top 25% of performers. In 2023, California's SDI score stood at 1.17, making it the 6th highest-performing state (Figure 2). On its own and compared to other states, California stands out as an important success case in the 2010s and 2020s when it comes to expanding electoral democracy

Figure 2: Top 8 State Performers in the U.S by 2023



IV. Expanding Voter Access and Representation

With the broader context of California's democratic performance established, we now turn to the key policies that have shaped its trajectory, emphasizing the reforms implemented over the past several years. We begin by acknowledging the impact of California's Independent Redistricting Commission, established in 2008, which played an important role in changing the state's democratic trajectory. We then briefly review three core policy changes that improved democratic performance and expanded civic engagement in the Golden State: automatic voter registration, universal all-mail voting, and lastly, the expansion of voting rights to parolees.

California's Independent Redistricting Commission

Our early analysis of state democratic performance highlighted the consequential role of partisan gerrymanders across the U.S. during the 2010s (Grumbach 2022). Following the 2010 midterm election and redistricting cycle, states under Republican party control showed significant democratic backsliding, with legislative district maps redrawn to maximize party advantages, suppress electoral competitiveness, and exacerbate efficiency gaps and partisan bias¹. As a result, this effort led to some of the most severely gerrymandered maps in U.S history (Kirschenbaum and Li 2021).

Increasingly, voters and states have been moving towards establishing non-politician² redistricting commissions, driven by growing voter frustration and a widespread desire to challenge the status quo (McGhee and Krimm 2015). Of the 15 non-politician commissions tasked with drawing legislative boundaries, only four, including California, have been created through citizens' initiatives, a process that allows citizens to bring proposed statutes or constitutional amendments to a public vote— and a topic we touch on again in Section V (NCSL a). Through this process, citizens are able to circumvent state legislatures and partisan politics, and designate boundary drawing authority to multi-partisan citizens (Hill 2024). While independent commissions have faced pushback over the years, as a whole, they've proven to produce fairly balanced maps and reduce bias, enhance district competitiveness, and increase public trust and confidence (Li 2022).

California's Independent Redistricting Commission (2008) is a non-politician commission, composed of 14 citizens, including five democrats and five republicans, with four unaffiliated

1 Efficiency gap and partisan bias measures capture how much a party's statewide vote share affects their representation in the legislature, underscoring the impact of partisan skews and the fairness of electoral maps.

2 There are two forms of redistricting commissions, politician commissions and non-politician commissions. The composition of state commissions varies by state, with some focusing on legislative redistricting and others on drawing congressional boundaries (NCSL a).

party members (State of California). After the 2010 redistricting cycle, California's State House legislative maps remained relatively consistent from the 2000s, with a partisan bias score of 7.4% and an efficiency gap of 1.6% (PlanScore). Partisan bias and efficiency gap analysis are two quantitative measures that evaluate how equitably voters can influence and shape legislative outcomes. Looking at these measures for the California State Senate, we see a significant decrease in the states' partisan bias score, which dropped from 8.3% from the 2000 redistricting cycle to 4.7% during the 2010 redistricting cycle. On the other hand, California's State Senate efficiency gap increased from 0.4% to 4.7%, indicating that while efforts to reduce partisan bias succeeded, challenges remained in ensuring that each vote carried equal weight. We see a similar outcome for California's U.S House of Representatives, where partisan bias decreased by approximately 6% and efficiency gap increased by approximately 3% over the same period (PlanScore).

As of the 2020 redistricting cycle, partisan bias decreased across California's State House, State Senate, and U.S House. On the other hand, all three experienced an increase in efficiency gap (PlanScore). This outcome highlights the complexity of redistricting reforms, where addressing one metric of fairness can inadvertently exacerbate another. It also demonstrates the importance of evaluating democratic performance through both process and outcomes. On the process side, the creation of the Independent Redistricting Commission marked a critical step towards reducing partisan influence and enhancing transparency and accountability, transferring power from politicians and partisan actors to the hands of citizens. But on the other hand, outcome metrics reveal mixed results. While partisan bias has declined over time, with California's current maps being less skewed, the efficiency gap has increased, indicating potential disparities in vote-to-seat proportionality. Overall, process and outcomes should be evaluated independently, with the understanding that a more democratic process may not always guarantee an outcome that aligns with the idea of a "perfect map."

AVR

In 2018, California implemented front-end automatic voter registration (AVR), a reform designed to enhance voter turnout and election accessibility by eliminating barriers to registration. While only six states had implemented AVR prior to California, by 2023, nearly half of the U.S had followed suit, signaling a growing commitment to modernizing voter registration processes nationwide (Fordham 2022; NCSL b). California's AVR system works in conjunction with same-day registration, which also increases turnout by allowing unregistered voters who slipped through the cracks to register and cast a ballot at the same time (Grumbach and Hill 2022).

California's front-end AVR system automatically registers eligible voters when they come into contact with specific state agencies, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), unless

an individual requests to opt-out. This streamlined approach not only ensures more accurate voter rolls, as state agencies are able to update voter information in real-time, but it also simplifies the registration process, particularly for groups that face systemic barriers to registration, including low-income communities, marginalized communities, and young people (Fordham 2022). Evidence shows that individuals who frequently move within short time frames, whether to attend college or for financial reasons, are less likely to update their voter registration or re-register to vote, leading to lower participation rates (Wray-Lake et. al 2024).

According to a 2024 study conducted by McGhee and Romero, voter registrations through the California DMV have more than doubled since the implementation of AVR. In fact, at present, the California DMV is the most common place for individuals to register to vote, with over 57% of all new registrants, and 68% of re-registered voters, utilizing the AVR system (Meier, Romero, and McGhee 2024).

Universal Vote by Mail

In 2021, California became the eighth state to enact universal vote by mail (UVM) — a measure that requires each county to deliver ballots to all registered voters by mail, for all elections (Gorman 2021; NCSL d). In practice, UVM closely resembles absentee voting, as both allow voters to cast their ballots without having to visit their assigned polling location. As a result, these two policies often get lumped together as one, and as is the case with the SDI. While we don't distinguish between the two, and therefore, the implementation of UVM did not contribute to California's improved democratic performance per se, it remains a critically important effort (NCSL c). On that note, California is only one of 28 states that offers both "no-excuse" absentee voting and vote by mail³.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, an increasing number of states moved towards conducting all mail elections. In addition to California, Nevada and Vermont enacted UVM in 2021 (NCSL d). Studies conducted across states have shown that the reform improves voter turnout, with studies identifying two to eight percentage point effects (Bonica et al 2021). Nevertheless, some claim that UVM discourages in-person voting and limits in-person voting options, as well as introduces new barriers to voting, particularly for those that may require greater in-person assistance, such as young people, disabled voters, limited English proficiency voters, and voters of color. However, scholars have found that UVM enhances overall voter accessibility by reducing barriers, such as long wait times, lack of transportation, workplace scheduling conflicts, and threats faced by immunocompromised individuals (Bonica, Grumbach, Hill, and Jefferson 2021).

3 In fact, California was the first state to pass absentee voting in the 1980s (NCSL c; MIT Election Lab 2024).

Expanding Parolee Voting Rights

Over the past decade, California has pursued a series of reforms aimed at restoring voting rights to individuals with felony convictions. These efforts reflect the state's broader commitment to reducing barriers to democratic participation and fostering a more inclusive electorate.

In 2011, former California Governor Jerry Brown signed Assembly Bill 109, commonly known as "prison realignment" (Jollie and Budd 2024; Stanford Law School). This effort aimed to reduce the state's prison population by placing low-level offenders in county jails or under the supervision of county probation officers (Lofstrom and Martin 2015). At this time, the California State Constitution only disenfranchised people serving time in state prison or on parole for a felony conviction, thus, confusion arose regarding the voting rights of individuals who were subsequently moved to county facilities (Burks 2014). In 2014, the American Civil Liberties Union alleged that over 72,000 Californians were wrongfully being denied their right to vote under this new policy (ACLU 2014). As a result, the interpretation was challenged in *Scott v. Bowen*, leading to a key ruling and the passage of a 2016 law that restored voting rights to thousands of individuals under any form of community supervision other than state parole (ACLU 2014; Brennan Center 2020; Uggen et. al 2024).

In 2020, California voters approved Proposition 17, a constitutional amendment that further expanded voting rights to people on parole. This marked a significant step towards voter enfranchisement, affirming voting as a fundamental right and ensuring a more inclusive electorate (Brennan Center 2020; Jollie and Budd 2024). With that said, as of 2024, California remains one of 23 states that disenfranchises individuals serving time in prison, preventing them from voting until their sentence is complete (Uggen et. al 2024).

V. Looking Beyond the State Democracy Index

The SDI provides a robust framework for evaluating democratic health and performance— but it's not the whole story. There are factors beyond the SDI's 54 indicators that merit consideration, and that offer an additional lens through which we can examine democratic performance. In the case of California, some of these factors are unique to the state, such as its ballot counting rules and the ballot initiative process, and others reflect broader trends, including declining union membership, the challenges of localism, and limited party competition. While these factors are missing from the SDI and could provide valuable insights for a more comprehensive assessment, they also introduce important nuances. The first two factors— ballot counting rules and the ballot initiative process— expand opportunities for democratic participation and reflect outcomes of direct democracy, whereas factors like unionization and party competition can directly influence a states' performance, thus highlighting some limitations towards assessing democratic and electoral health.

We explore these nuances in the following section, acknowledging both the positive and negative outcomes they produce.

Ballot Counting Times

As studies have shown, universal vote by mail and same-day voter registration have been found to promote election accessibility and voter turnout, as well as combat voter suppression efforts. However, one cascading consequence of these two policies is that ballots may be cast or postmarked up to, and including on, Election Day. With an increasing number of voters utilizing these two options— not to mention in the U.S' most populous state (39 million as of 2024)— ballot counting times have become a slow and lengthy process. Reports indicate that out of all 50 states, California ranks the slowest to report on election day results. For further context, results from the 2022 midterm election showed that an estimated 90% of voters cast their ballots by mail (California Secretary of State 2025). Furthermore, over the past five general elections, California estimated that 38% of its votes were not counted until after election day (Sweedler 2024). While these policies undoubtedly contribute to greater participation and democratic outcomes, slow counting times can sow doubt among voters and the general public, create confusion, and impact institutional trust (Lee 2024; Sweedler 2024).

Citizen-Initiative Process

Only 24 states allow for citizen-initiated ballot measures—the same process that led to California’s Independent Redistricting Commission in 2008 (NCSL e). Since the policy’s implementation in 1911, more than 390 initiatives have qualified for the California ballot, and roughly 35% have been passed by voters (NCSL e; Baldassare 2022). This remarkable example of direct democracy has not only resulted in public victories but the process also continues to enjoy broad bipartisan support, with a 2022 study showing that 66% of Democrats, 70% of Republicans, and 63% of Independents view the process positively (Baldassare 2022). That said, the citizen-initiative process is not without its faults—voters have long argued that the wording of citizen-initiatives is often confusing or intentionally misleading, frequently aligned with or financially backed by special interest groups¹, and, in some cases, contribute to lengthy ballots that can become cumbersome, to the point of dissuading voter participation² (California Secretary of State 2022; California Secretary of State 2024). More research is also needed to understand the potential for well-resourced organizations to spend large sums on signature gathering and advertising for ballot initiatives that can potentially move policy away from voter preferences, repeal popular legislation, or exploit the recall process.

Declining Union Membership

Labor unions have long played a critical role in fostering political participation and amplifying the voices of working-class communities in the democratic process. A union’s core function is to equip workers with the skills to organize, engage in protest, and collect votes, and research shows that these lessons extend their influence beyond union-specific activities to broader civic engagement (Frymer, Grumbach, and Hill 2025). In fact, union membership has been directly linked to higher levels of community engagement, voter registration, and voter turnout, as well as influential in driving political discourse and shaping election outcomes (Frymer, Grumbach, and Hill 2025). However, the past several decades have witnessed a sharp decline in U.S. union membership, driven in large part by the emergence and expansion of right-to-work (RTW) laws, which have significantly weakened union power and influence. RTW laws, which are present in 26 states, allow employees to opt-out of union membership or from paying union dues, while still allowing workers to benefit from union representation, effectively weakening the financial and organizational stability of labor unions, including their capacity to allocate funds for broader public policy issues and advocacy efforts (Frymer, Grumbach, and Hill 2025). While California has traditionally boasted one of the highest union membership rates in the country, it has not been immune to broader trends of decline, as the percentage of California workers covered by

4 Only two citizens-initiatives qualified for the 2022 midterm ballot, and combined, these two measures received over \$47 million in contributions (California Secretary of State 2022).

5 California’s 2024 general election ballot featured 10 propositions, including five citizen-initiatives, alongside two bond proposals and elections for local supervisors, school board officials, congressional and senate seats, the presidential race, and more (California Secretary of State 2024).

unions declined from over 25% to about 15% since the 1980s. Reformers who hope to protect and expand electoral democracy in California should be attentive to opportunities related to the labor movement.

Limited Party Competition

Since the mid-1990s, California Democrats have outperformed California Republicans in both state assembly and state senate elections. While a majority of California voters are registered as Democrats, dissatisfaction with the state legislature remains high, with 56% of adults and 55% of likely voters expressing disapproval. Unsurprisingly, disapproval is also high with Republicans at 92%. These beliefs even hold true for legislators that represent voters' own districts (Baldassare et. al 2024). It's true that California's progressive policies have contributed to the state's strong democracy performance. Nevertheless, a lack of party competition is a threat to civic engagement and voter participation, voter turnout, innovative policy ideas, and the ability for new voices to be heard. Political parties, when competitive, serve as vital mediators in a democracy, fostering government accountability, engaging new voters, and encouraging diverse policy ideas— a dynamic increasingly absent in California's political landscape (Baldassare et. al 2024; Drutman 2023).

The Challenges of Localism

California has a history of advancing and enacting progressive state-level policies, driven in part by its predominantly Democratic political base and progressive leadership. But there's a limit to this progressivism, and it usually comes in the form of local government opposition. To highlight one example, between 2017 and 2023, over 100 pieces of legislation were passed by lawmakers to build affordable housing and incentivize local governments to approve and expedite housing approval processes (Fulton et. al 2023). However, local governments, in the name of maintaining property values and neighborhood characteristics, have responded to these bills with additional bureaucratic hurdles, including "poison pills," a design and procedural requirement that renders affordable housing projects structurally or financially unviable. Further, local governments have stepped up zoning infractions and fines, lawsuits, requests for historic preservation reviews, and in some cases, outright refusals to comply (Gill and Schuetz 2023; Horowitz 2024). State lawmakers have passed a series of measures, such as SB 35 and SB 330, to counter local holdups to housing development, and evidence shows that these policies have been working. In Los Angeles, for example, median approval time for qualifying developments was cut down from approximately seven months to 2.7 months (Horowitz 2024). However, these outcomes have not been evenly distributed. Here, we can see the effects of localism, and California is not alone. While housing highlights just one example of the ongoing tensions between state and local politics. Similar battles persist in other policy areas, such as climate change adaptation,

transportation infrastructure, and education funding, where state mandates often clash with local priorities and autonomy.

VI. Conclusion

This report provides an overview and analysis of the voter reforms and administrative procedures that have positioned California as a model for democratic performance. The state, which was a middling performer in the 2000s, has since expanded voter rights, improved election accessibility, and promoted inclusive governance. At a time when many states across the U.S face challenges such as voter suppression, partisan gerrymandering, and declining institutional trust, California demonstrates how policy efforts can improve election accessibility, equal representation, and positive democratic outcomes. Further, California illustrates how state-level initiatives can serve as counterbalances to federal actions, ensuring that democratic principles are upheld and that governance remains responsive to the needs of citizens. California's transformation story since 2010 is one of ongoing struggle and underlying complexity, but ultimately, success.

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