

POLITICS '92

DISPIRITED CALIFORNIA FACES PIVOTAL ELECTIONS

By Mark DiCamillo

This is an unusually turbulent and pivotal year in California politics: Turbulent because voters are uncharacteristically downcast, highly critical of politicians at all levels. Pivotal not only because California's role in determining who will be the next president is greater than ever, but also because there are so many important and highly competitive legislative races to be decided.

Unusual Pessimism

A traditionally optimistic and future-oriented breed, Californians approach the November elections in a gloomy mood. The current economic downturn has hit the state hard. Layoffs in its huge defense and aerospace industries, water shortages slowing the agricultural output of the Central Valley, deficits and service cutbacks downsizing state and local governments, restructuring in the high technology sector, and corporate relocations outside the state have converged to make the current recession the most severe this state has seen since World War II.

On top of these economic woes, the May 1992 Los Angeles riots, which caused billions of dollars in damages and claimed more than forty lives, left lasting scars on the once proud face of California's multi-cultural citizenry. Even more than their sheer destructiveness, the riots dramatized the increasing strain on the state's social fabric caused by nearly two decades of an almost continuous stream of immigration from around the globe.

Over the past twelve years alone, California has gained 7 million new residents, more than the total population of each of 42 states. The burden of accommodating such unprecedented growth has compounded the state's more traditional

problems: freeway traffic, smog, urban violence, drug abuse, and homelessness, and has strained the state's ability to meet the needs of millions of people, especially in the areas of education and health care.

The current state of affairs has fostered a sense among many that the state's problems are spiraling out of control. Unlike previous recessions when most residents were generally optimistic that the economic pain of the moment would be short lived, a general sense of pessimism persists among Californians about the state's economic future.

During the last recession in the early 1980s, The Field Poll found that 77% of Californians described the economy as being in bad times, while just 10% felt it was good. Yet, a majority (58%) expressed confidence that the state's economic condition would improve in the coming year. By contrast, in the current recession, more than 8 in 10 residents (85%) consider California's economy to

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be in bad times and just 22% expect it to improve in the coming year.

Another example of the uncharacteristic gloom that has pervaded the California psyche is the markedly lower assess-

ment that residents have of their state as a place to live. Ever since World War II, and as recently as 1985, about 75% of all adults in California described the state as "one of the best places to live". But, in late July of this year, the proportion giving the state such an exalted rating had plummeted to 30%.

California's big decline in appeal as a place to live is not restricted to a few areas of the state or particular social groups. Young and old, members of all ethnic and racial groups, the poor and the well-to-do, as well as residents in all parts of the state have reassessed their once rosy appraisal of California life.

State and Local Budget Cutbacks

In the midst of the current economic slowdown, the public has been treated to a steady stream of reports describing the financial condition of their state, county and city governments in terms of "massive deficits," "escalating costs," and "major cutbacks in services." In the summer of 1991, after several months of highly contentious debate, Republican Governor Pete Wilson and Democratic leaders in the state legislature reached a bipartisan compromise to erase a \$14 billion state budget shortfall. In the aftermath, Californians saw state sales taxes and fees for many public services increase, and spending for numerous public programs cut back.

Were this not enough, the 1991 service cuts and tax increases didn't do the job. This year, the state budget deficit was another \$10.7 billion. Because the most palatable cutbacks and fee increases had already been made last year, lawmakers and the governor found the task of agreeing on a state budget much more difficult. The result was an historic

stalemate, requiring the issuance of billions of dollars of I.O.U.'s to meet many of the state's financial obligations. In further response, national credit rating agencies lowered state bond ratings, which will cost the state tens of millions of dollars in additional interest expenses. The budget finally enacted two months after its constitutional deadline is an austere one that cuts deeply into health, welfare, and education funding, and significantly reduces state support for cities and counties.

Job Performance Ratings of Elected Officials Near Record Lows

A mid-September Field Poll showed that most Californians disapproved of the budget that was finally agreed upon and that all elected officials, both Democratic and Republican, were criticized for their

performance in resolving the budget deadlock. Not surprisingly in this environment, record or near record proportions of Californians now hold negative impressions of their elected representatives in both Sacramento and Washington.

The job performance ratings of Governor Wilson in mid September were among the worst ever recorded by The Field Poll. Just 19% rated him as doing an excellent or good job, 23% rated his performance fair, while 47% gave him poor or very poor marks. The appraisals of such former governors as Republicans George Deukmejian and Ronald Reagan, or Democrat Pat Brown, were never as negative as this. In fact, in the last thirty years, the only previous governor to have received ratings as low as those given Wilson was Democrat Jerry Brown shortly after his aborted run for the presidency in

April 1980. The public's appraisal of the overall job performance of the state legislature also stood at historically low levels in late July, with just 9% rating the legislature positively, 51% negatively. (See Figure 1, on the next page.)

Californians gave George Bush's job performance their lowest marks of his term--marks comparable to those given Jimmy Carter in September 1980, shortly before he lost his re-election bid to Republican Ronald Reagan. Just 21% rated Bush as doing an excellent or good job, while 45% viewed his performance as poor or very poor. Similarly, Californians' impression of the job being done by the US Congress is also highly negative. Just 6% of the public in late July rated the Congress as doing an excellent or good job; 52% called its performance poor or very poor.

TABLE 1
Highest and Lowest Job Performance Ratings of Recent California Governors

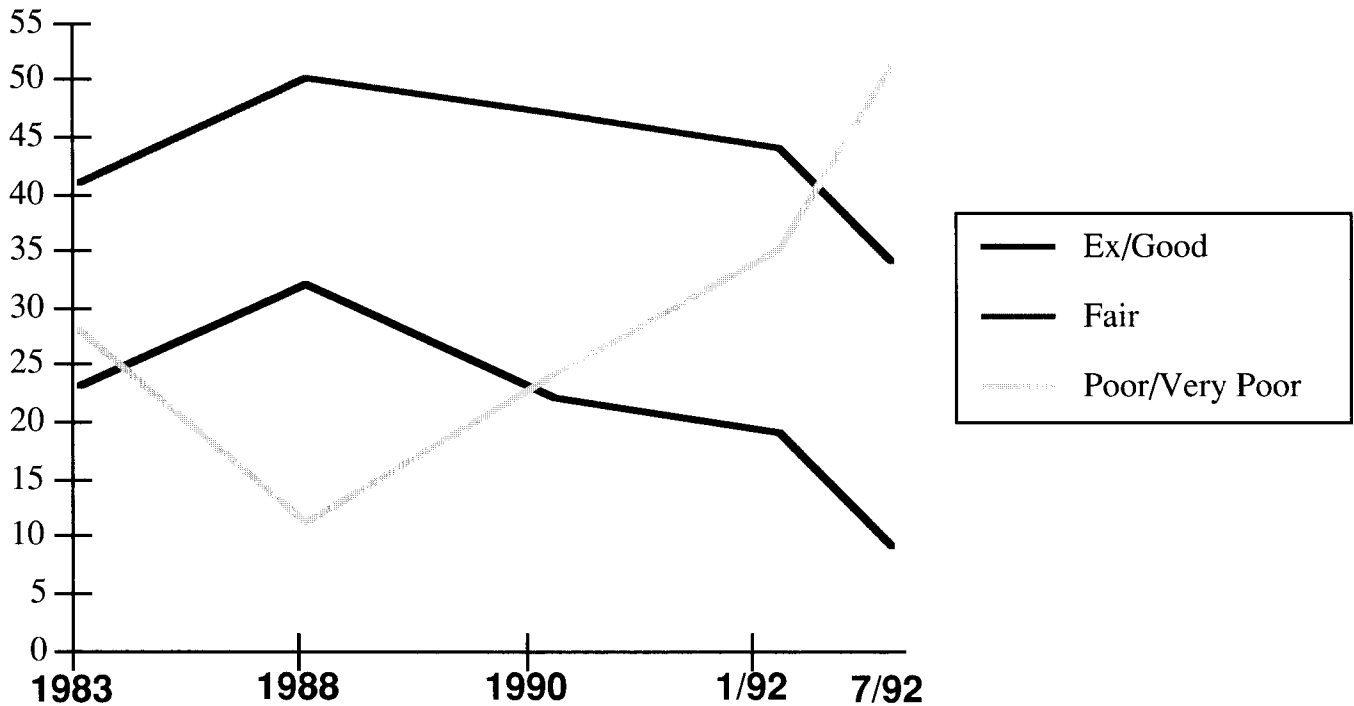
Question: What kind of job do you think [name] is doing as Governor—an excellent, good, fair, poor or very poor job?

	<u>Excellent/ Good</u>	<u>Fair</u>	<u>Poor/ Very Poor</u>	<u>No Opinion</u>
<u>Pete Wilson (Rep.)</u>				
Highest (Feb '91)	36%	31%	12%	21%
Lowest (Sept. '92)	19	23	47	11
<u>George Deukmejian (Rep.)</u>				
Highest (Aug '85)	55	35	7	3
Lowest (Aug '90)	36	33	29	2
<u>Jerry Brown (Dem.)</u>				
Highest (Mar '76)	53	32	9	6
Lowest (Apr '80)	24	28	47	1
<u>Ronald Reagan (Rep.)</u>				
Highest (Feb '69)	42	36	15	7
Lowest (Aug '71)	28	37	33	2
<u>Pat Brown (Dem.)</u>				
Highest (Feb '62)	23	39	29	9
Lowest (Mar '61)	21	35	32	12

Source: The Field Poll, of the dates shown.

Figure 1
Californians' Now Give Record Low Marks
to Their State Legislature

Questions: What kind of job do you think the state legislature is doing overall—an excellent, good, fair, poor, or very poor job? (The Field Poll, of the dates shown.)



Rise and Fall of Perot and Post-Convention Bounces

This spring, California was at the forefront of the remarkable, albeit short-lived, boomlet of support for the presidential candidacy of Ross Perot. This initial infatuation was fed by the unprecedented situation wherein majorities of voters held unfavorable assessments of each of the major party presidential contenders prior to the California primary election. In early May, The Field Poll found the Texas industrialist leading the incumbent president by 6 points and Bill Clinton by 12 points, making California one of the first reported states where Perot was the outright leader. A subsequent Field Poll conducted immediately prior to the June 2 primary found Perot looking even better: He led both Bush and Clinton by 13 percentage points.

The events of early July, with the withdrawal of Perot from active participation in the race coupled with the highly successful Democratic convention in New York, had the effect initially of transferring almost *en masse* Perot's support to the Democratic ticket. Shortly after the Democratic convention, The Field Poll found former Perot supporters backing Clinton four to one over Bush. Overall, a late July Field Poll showed the Democratic ticket with a phenomenal 34-point lead over the GOP ticket, the largest ever held by a major party presidential ticket in the poll's 45-year history.

The August GOP convention, and the resulting "post-convention bounce" it fostered, brought back to the fold many disgruntled Republicans and GOP-leaning independents to the Bush camp. Yet, in September the question remained, could

the incumbent president re-position himself and his candidacy to offer Californians greater hope for economic revitalization and optimism in the future than his more youthful Democratic opponents?

High Stakes

The stakes of this year's election contests in California have never been higher. The state now has a record 54 electoral votes, one fifth of the total needed to elect a president. Even though many within the GOP have asserted that Bush can win reelection without California this time around, history would indicate otherwise. Since 1880, no Republican has ever been elected to the White House without capturing California. The state's place as one of the key battlegrounds in this year's presidential election campaign would seem assured.

Two Women for the US Senate

For the first time this century, California voters will be selecting *two* U.S. Senators in 1992, and no elected incumbents are running in either contest. This situation arose from the decision of Democrat Alan Cranston not to seek re-election, and from the election of California's former junior U.S. Senator Pete Wilson as Governor in 1990. Not only are these "open-seat" contests historic because they are being held in the same year, but they possess even greater national significance because two female candidates are the nominees of the Democratic party.

Wilson's appointed successor, Republican John Seymour, faces former San Francisco Mayor, Democrat Dianne Feinstein, while Republican television commentator Bruce Herschensohn squares off against Democratic Congresswoman Barbara Boxer for Cranston's seat. In The Field Poll's late July survey both Feinstein and Boxer held comfortable leads over their GOP opponents. Feinstein led Seymour by a 55% to 37% margin, while Boxer led Herschensohn 48% to 31%,

The twin candidacies of Feinstein and Boxer open up the possibility that gender, and gender-related issues like abortion rights, pay equity, sexual harassment and child care, will play a larger role in this year's state elections. Some observers have speculated that the contests may create a "skirttails effect" on other races. In this fall's elections women are major party candidates in 16 of the state's 52 US house races, 40 of its 80 assembly contests and 6 of its 20 state senate elections, making 1992 a year when women can potentially secure more seats at higher

levels in California government than ever before.

Competitive Races at All Legislative Levels

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all legislative levels which, when linked to the general anti-establishment mood of voters, could lead to a major shake-up in the state's Sacramento and Washington delegations. One of the driving forces behind this is redistricting and reapportionment. Seven new congressional districts were added in California following the 1990 census, bringing the state's total to 52. In addition, a larger than usual number of incumbents have decided not to seek re-election this year. Of the state's current US house delegation, nine will not be on the ballot in November. There will be open-seat contests in almost one-third of the state's congressional elections. In addition, about one-third of the members of the state assembly are vacating it, and about 10% of the state senate are leaving, because of retirement, the quest for higher office, or defeat in primary election contests.

Even incumbents seeking re-election this year are likely to face greater competitive challenges. Every congressional and legislative district has been newly drawn for this election by non-partisan masters appointed by the state supreme court. Most districts are now more evenly divided between Democratic and Republican voters, especially when compared to their former heavily gerrymandered districts drawn by the Democrats following the 1980 census. Many district boundaries have changed dramatically, leaving incumbents to run in less familiar territories. Further, the greater opportunities for political advancement at the top have stimulated elected officeholders at lower levels to attempt to move up the political ladder this year, creating even more open-seat contests at lower levels.

Following the 1849 discovery of gold, the world began rushing to California. Up until recently, the state was so large geographically and economically, and its people so imbued with vitality and confidence in the future, that accommodating this huge uninterrupted growth was taken in stride, and indeed was a source of pride. Newcomers and their offspring spoke ebulliently about the state--its climate, its many economic, educational, and recreational opportunities, and its special lifestyle.

Today, though, Californians are undergoing a large change in outlook that will have lasting economic, social and political consequences. The future appears less hopeful to many residents. The collective anger and frustration which this situation has engendered could have profound political reverberations at the polling booths. And, because there are more competitive races at all levels than at any time in recent memory, the November 1992 election returns could reshape the California political landscape for many years to come.

A Recent Presidential Trial Heat in California

Poll of 9/3-7 by Political/
Media Research for the
San Francisco Examiner

Clinton	48%
Bush	38
Undecided	14

*Mark DiCamillo is associate
director, The Field Poll.*