

# The California Experience

By Charles F. Rund and Tracey Soeth

Hit hard by a series of economic, natural, and social disasters, the 1990s have been difficult for California. Residents felt the sting of a severe economic recession as several of the state's key industries fell apart early in the decade. At the same time, the military complex collapsed and the high tech community was feeling the wrath of weak Asian markets. Additionally, real estate prices plummeted and large corporations began laying off employees in droves. California's recovery lagged behind the rest of the country, and was still feeling the recession until early 1996. As if these economic problems were not enough, Californians also faced an array of natural disasters ranging from earthquakes and fires to floods and drought. Finally, Californians experienced extreme social dislocation beginning with the 1992 Rodney King riots and continuing with serious voter discontent over long-standing public programs such as welfare, affirmative action, and immigration policies.

Since it has problems of seemingly biblical proportions, one might wonder why anybody would live in California. In fact, people have stayed, and even more have poured across our borders. What makes California so unique that people are attracted to the state, warts and all? And how do residents define "The California Experience?"

## Climate and Diversity Appeal to Californians

Charlton Research has been studying attitudes of California residents for over a decade. To explore further the concept of "The California Experience," we recently conducted a survey of 600 state residents. The results confirmed previous findings that, despite all of its problems, Californians love their state. The study also debunked a widely-held assumption that the state has a transient and unstable population. In fact, over two-thirds of our respondents indicated that they had been state residents for more than 20 years; only 4% had lived here less than five years.

According to our research, there are two reasons driving Californians' loyalty to the state: great weather and diversity. The love of great weather is simple. With the exception of the occasional El Niño flooding, California offers relatively pleasant weather compared to much of the country. Severe winter weather occurs only in isolated areas and, even in the height of summer, the humidity barely registers.

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The other common theme in survey responses was that the California Experience is unique because it offers diversity in many aspects of daily living. For example, one respondent asserted that California offers "freedom of expression and a climate that allows you to participate in the lifestyle that you are choosing."

Diversity in interests also emerged when we asked respondents to choose which item from a list of seven makes California different from the rest of the country. The

responses included: California represents cultural diversity (23%); it is the capital of the entertainment industry (16%); the state offers an abundance of outdoor recreation activities (15%); rich farmlands grow abundant crops to feed the country (13%); California has led the high tech revolution (12%); alternative lifestyle opportunities are offered (10%); and, California offers unique tourist opportunities (6%).

The concept of diversity permeates all aspects of the California Experience. In fact, with its geographic size, large population, and cultural diversity, California is bigger and more complex than many foreign countries or entire regions of the US. To capture this diversity, we have developed the "Six States of California" model in which the state is segmented into distinct subgroups allowing us to see where regional differences emerge. The six "states" include:

- *The Northern Counties* make up a third of the state but less than one-tenth of the population.
- *The San Francisco Bay Area* comprises about one-fifth of the state's population, is widely associated with liberal ideology, and houses Silicon Valley.
- *Valley* residents make up roughly 15% of the population. The region is growing rapidly, but still celebrates its rural farming roots.
- *The Coastal Counties* account for about 7% of the population. These Californians tend to be highly educated, older, and conservative.
- *Los Angeles* offers the most urban living, and has the largest African American population in the state as well as a sizable Latino population.
- *The Southern Counties* are largely suburban and residents tend to be relatively wealthy. The area is mostly white, but Latinos are prevalent as well.

Not surprisingly, a majority of Californians agree that the state's increasing demographic diversity is

good. When told that “by 2000, California will be the first large state where minorities comprise a majority of the state population, bringing new problems and opportunities that will need to be addressed,” 58% agreed that these cultural trends are good for the state, with 26% considering them bad. Respondents from the Bay Area were more likely than others to agree that increased diversity is a good thing, while those in the Valley tended to view it negatively.

### Californians’ Upbeat Mood

Unlike the rest of the country, a thick cloud of negativity has hovered over California since 1990. Things were so dismal during the early part of this decade that as many as eight-in-ten residents felt things in the state had “gotten off on the wrong track.” But in February 1998, the state seemed to turn the corner, finally emerging from its funk. After a sharp rise in general optimism was recorded in February, the positive mood has stabilized with nearly half of Californians now believing that things in the state are generally going in the right direction. Northern California residents (the Bay Area and Northern Counties) are more likely than their Southern California counterparts to indicate the state is moving in the right direction. The biggest reason for this positive mood is a healthy economy. According to several recent Field Polls, most Californians hold relatively high expectations for the state’s economy—and even higher expectations for their personal finances—during the next 12 months.

Another result of the healthy economy is that Californians have begun to focus less on economic concerns and more on social issues. Crime is identified as the single most important issue facing the state, followed closely by education, health care, and immigration.

Finally, Californians overwhelmingly approve of the state’s quality of life. When asked to rate on a nine-point scale their satisfaction with the quality of life in California (with nine being extremely satisfied), three-quarters offered a response above six. Furthermore, 20% are extremely satisfied. Again, Northern Californians seem to be the most satisfied with their quality of life, and the least satisfied live in the Coastal Counties.

When asked to name the one thing that comes to mind when thinking of California, over two-thirds of respondents mentioned something positive with a plurality (41%) identifying natural attributes such as climate, oceans, and beaches. The lifestyle including abundant recreation opportunities, quality education, cultural diversity, progressive attitudes, and a strong economy, were suggested by 12%. Valley residents were more likely to mention something negative, while people in the Bay Area tended to be more positive. Overall, less than one-quarter offered a negative answer including environmental problems (e.g., pollution and earthquakes), too much growth, economic problems (e.g., high taxes and cost of living), and social problems (e.g., crime).

Interestingly, when we asked this same question of Californians during the height of a statewide recession in 1991, responses were only slightly less positive. Even though more than half of the state’s residents registered a negative mood at the time, 60% offered positive responses. Again, most mentioned natural attributes (39%) including climate and oceans. The higher negative attitudes (35%) can be attributed to more respondents mentioning a water shortage (the state was in the midst of a severe drought) and economic problems.

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### California Sets the Nation’s Trends

More recently, we asked a national sample of adults to name the one thing that comes to mind when thinking of California. The responses indicate that the rest of the country has more ambivalent attitudes toward California with over half offering a negative answer and 43% mentioning a positive aspect. One-in-five national respondents identified earthquakes as the first thing that comes to mind while only 2% of California respondents mentioned earthquakes. Additionally, more national respondents identified smog or pollution and growth problems than California respondents.

Finally, both California and national respondents were asked whether they agreed that many political, economic, and social trends begin in California. Three-quarters of Californians agreed with this idea, with over half of those agreeing strongly. And, despite their ambivalent attitudes toward California, two-thirds of national respondents also agreed that the state is a trend setter, again with half of those agreeing strongly.

With respect to social and cultural diversity, California will lead the way into the twenty-first century. As its diverse populations learn to work and live together during the next 50 years, California can offer an interesting case study in the “reculturation” of the nation.



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