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California Journal of Politics and Policy

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/94d7880g>

Journal

California Journal of Politics and Policy, 3(1)

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Publication Date

2011-05-03

DOI

10.5070/P2HW2D

Peer reviewed

Does Political Geography Determine Political
Destiny? A Review of *The New Political
Geography of California* by Frédéric Douzet,
Thad Kousser, and Kenneth P. Miller

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Reading Frédéric Douzet, Thad Kousser, and Kenneth Miller's *The New Political Geography of California* (2008), prompted me to imagine a companion volume on the Ancient Political Geography of California, one authored, perhaps, by prominent state historians and anthropologists who could speak authoritatively on the persistence of regional, cultural, political, and economic divisions from the earliest civilizations to inhabit the state. California entered the Union with strong geographic and political divisions that held important implications for the

development of the state, and a sense of a northern and southern California divide appears to have been entrenched by the division in 1804 of the Spanish Province of Las Californias into two separate territorial administrations, Alta and Baja California. Visitors to Sonoma county find Fort Ross, a northern coastal Russian fur trapping outpost from the mid 19th century perched uncomfortably close the General Vallejo's garrisons in Sonoma, defining the unofficial border of Mexican holdings at the northernmost reach of the Mission trail.

The subsequent seizure of California by U.S. troops and the rapid transition to statehood in 1850 did little to calm the regional divide between north and south, and long standing geographic divisions were amplified by a population boom during the Gold Rush that set the northern half of the state apart from long established farming and ranch-

Review of *The New Political Geography of California* by Frédéric Douzet, Thad Kousser, and Kenneth P. Miller. 2008. Berkeley: Berkeley Public Policy Press, University of California, Berkeley.

ing communities in the southland. After entering the Union as a free state, southern California politicians—unhappy with heavy handed taxation from the populous north, and divided over slavery—introduced the first of many secession proposals for dividing California state, culminating with the 1859 Pico Bill, a proposal to create the state of Colorado below San Louis Obispo (Richards 2008, 225). This bill was surprisingly successful, but fell victim to poor timing in national politics. The Pico bill passed the California Assembly and was signed by the governor before dying in Congress on the eve of the Civil War (Richards 2008, 225).

Today, activists carry on the tradition with repeated—but rarely credible—calls for secession emerging from the far reaches of northern, central, or southern California, most disagreeing over where to draw the border. An effort to create the state of Jefferson by partitioning parts of southern Oregon and northern California in 1941 rivaled the Pico bill for poor timing, with the call for secession occurring days before Japan’s bombing of Pearl Harbor. Even today, people crossing the California/Oregon border are greeted with a recently painted sign declaring the state of Jefferson on a barnside just off Interstate 5.

Owing to the historical divisions between north and south, politics in California have long been colored by a strong sense of geography. Following elections, newspapers across the state routinely publish detailed political

maps of regional preferences for statewide races, as well as for initiatives on issues ranging from gay marriage, affirmative action, or immigration reform. These maps reinforce a strong sense of regional difference, with coastal northern California historically favoring more progressive politicians and policy proposals than their southern neighbors.

Those familiar with the political battles fought during the periodic droughts that plague the state are familiar with the bitter divisions that emerge as central California’s agribusinesses and the large but parched urban centers of southern California compete with their northern neighbors for rights to the water flowing in the Sacramento, Petaluma, and Napa rivers into San Francisco Bay.

Bitterness over these competitions for natural resources and policy emerge in the regional battles that truly rile Californians. In 2008, after decades of debate, lawyers representing the Shoreline surf shop in Santa Cruz sued the city of Huntington after it secured trademark rights to the title “Surf City, USA” (Carcamo 2008). At the outset of the lawsuit, representatives for the defense filed a change of venue motion to move the hearing from San Francisco to southern California, arguing that Huntington Beach “Couldn’t get a fair trial in northern California” (Lattman 2007). The two parties ultimately came to a settlement, but this did little to resolve animosity between northern and southern Californians. Passions still flare when unsuspect-

ing visitors ask residents where to find California's best burrito.

California's culture and politics have long been painted as following a sweeping North-South divide, but over the past decade observers have noted a shift in the geopolitical orientation of the state, suggesting that generalizations about northern and southern Californian differences no longer fully capture regional differences in political views in the Golden State. During the 2010 governors campaign, Arnold Schwarzenegger tweeted a reminder to Jerry Brown and Meg Whitman cautioning them against their coastal bias in the buildup to the general election. Northern CA is the upper body, Southern CA is the lower body, and the Central Valley is the abs. You can't neglect the abs, candidates" (Schwarzenegger 2010).

The former governor's humor belies a more serious shift in the geopolitics of the state that has taken root most recently in the annual negotiations over the budget. Here politics fracture ideologically along an East/West divide, with a small group of inland republicans from Yreka to Calexico standing in opposition to the budget preferences of coastal progressives.

Clearly geo-political context still matters for understanding politics in the Golden State, but it can no longer be neatly organized along a simple north/south regional dichotomy. To understand recent trends in California politics requires grounding in a sense of California's shifting

political geography. Although cultural differences between northern and southern California persist, the state's political division now divides East and West, with progressives dominating coastal politics, and a strong conservative presence entrenched down the central valley and inland counties.

Frédéric Douzet, Thad Kousser, and Kenneth Miller's *New Political Geography of California* engages the trends that have transformed the state, carefully documenting the demographic shifts over the past 30 years that have transformed state and regional politics in California. The volume takes the conventional wisdom about state politics head on, and does more than simply identify new broad divisions in state politics. It is not simply that California now divides ideologically down the I-5 corridor, but perhaps more importantly that immigration and in-state migration trends have transformed regional and municipal voting coalitions in ways that have profound implications for politics in the Golden State.

The *New Political Geography of California* is organized in three sections—the first documenting the broad demographic changes in the state, the second providing a fresh perspective on geopolitical divides in key regions and municipalities, and the final one considering political implications of California's demographic transformation. It is a dense, rich volume that should interest a broad audience of advanced undergraduate and graduate students

in political science, urban politics, geography and public administration, as well as practitioners and researchers interested in understanding how modern demographic trends have altered California politics.

Douzet and Miller's opening chapter documents the recent transformation of California's geo-political landscape. Drawing on careful analysis of trends in the ethnic, political, and economic distribution of California's population, the authors establish that California's historical North/South divide—traditionally characterized by strong conservative voting blocks in the South and liberal Democrat enclaves in the northern coastal counties—no longer accurately describes the economic, ethnic, and political distribution of the state's voters. Instead, the “dramatic changes of the last generation have blurred distinctions between northern and southern California while accentuating differences between coastal and inland regions” (2). The *New Political Geography of California* characterizes the state as divided along an east/west axis, with strong ideological divisions between the populous and ethnically diverse coastal counties and the rural, conservative and more homogenous inland counties running north/south along the state's central spine.

This opening chapter is filled with political maps illustrating changes in the composition of California's counties and congressional districts over the last few decades, illustrating the shift in racial composition, educational attainment,

income, and partisan preferences of voters throughout the state. The accumulation of census detail can be overwhelming, but Douzet and Miller leave little doubt that the demography has altered politics, creating new opportunities while challenging long-standing coalitions. The reader may wish the authors had expanded their analysis of the implications of the growing coastal concentrations of wealth, race, and partisanship for politics, policy, or future electoral coalitions in California, but these are secondary concerns in a chapter designed to persuade a skeptic that the state's geopolitics have fundamentally changed. In this sense, the opening essay provides a strong starting point for the more narrow discussions that follow.

The careful attention to demographic detail emerges as a theme throughout the volume, as chapter after chapter explores California's emerging political divides. Douzet continues the analysis with an important chapter on how immigration and internal migration have encouraged residential segregation and political balkanization across the state, while Ariane Zambiras's “Shifts in the Religious Divide” provides an uneven but useful reference for thinking about how religious currents observed at the national level—such as the growing popularity of evangelical Christianity in suburban and exurban enclaves—have taken hold in state politics.

Douzet's “Residential Segregation and Political Balkanization” offers an intriguing discussion of how internal

migration patterns shape politics in the state. The chapter documents an important trend beneath the surface of most research on California politics, carefully detailing how the diversity that now defines California as a whole has produced ethnically segregated regions. Douzet argues that “the spatial distribution of the population and its political affiliations are even more of a challenge in California because of the highly decentralized, fractionalized and localized nature of the power structure and the existence of the dual democracy system” (67). The battles that emerge over infrastructure, land use, public transit, environmental defense, social policy and electoral reform are not simply battles between regions of segregated suburbs and cities, but play out even within municipalities, as urban segregation and racial fractionalization complicate local democratic decision-making.

These are powerful insights for students and policymakers alike, and it is disappointing that Douzet doesn't explicitly connect her descriptive research to the broader body of work that explores how racial and ethnic heterogeneity shape distributive and redistributive policymaking (see for example, Hero and Tolbert 1996). With her careful attention to measures of racial and ethnic composition in California, Douzet could provide important insights into key questions for the future of state and local politics, and in so doing provide important tests of the racial threat (Kinder and Sears 1981) and contact (Allport 1954) hy-

potheses that are central to researchers interested in policy making in ethnically diverse governments. An enterprising student may find an opportunity to integrate Douzet's measures of segregation and balkanization into a study of local redistributive policymaking. In this regard, the chapter succeeds in documenting an important and understudied trend in California, but it falls short of convincing the reader that there are immediate implications to these emerging geo-political pockets of segregation.

While the early sections of *The New Political Geography of California* address broad geo-political trends in the state's religious, ethnic and political groups, the second part of the book adopts a narrower focus on local and regional developments. Taken together, these chapters stand as an important second corrective to the popular but dated notion that California's geo-political divide can be organized along a simple north/south or east/west dichotomy. The same demographic forces that have altered the ethnic, economic and political distribution over the last 30 years have also reshaped community politics, leading to the formation of new coalitions and the retrenchment of an old guard resistant to change. The chapters addressing the geo-political transformation in Los Angeles, San Diego, Oakland, and the San Joaquin Valley offer valuable insights into how macro level demographic trends have shaped local politics throughout the state.

Readers attuned to large trends in California's top of the ticket elections will find Dan Walter's chapter "How Los Angeles has Reshaped California Politics" particularly engaging. The central, important thesis of the chapter is that the shifting demographic and partisan preferences in Los Angeles have made it harder for Republicans to execute the "fishhook strategy," an electoral coalition of conservative and moderate counties running down inland California before hooking up through San Diego, Orange County and into Los Angeles.

"If there is one constant in Los Angeles" Walters argues, "it is change," (202) and recent trends in the outmigration of overwhelmingly white voters and the continued influx of foreign immigration produced "a massive cultural, economic and political impact on Los Angeles County" (204).

The key change has been a marked decline in the base of support for the GOP, with Republican voter registration in LA declining to just 28%, a weakening of political strength that has distorted LA's long standing political neutrality in top of the ticket elections. Walters argues that a shift in the composition and preferences in the state's largest county is immediately responsible for a reversal of a century long trend of Republican success in statewide elections—an argument that fits the most recent contest between Meg Whitman and Jerry Brown—where Whit-

man's geo-political base of support looked more like a needle than a fishhook.

Walters doesn't argue that the shifting preferences of LA are the only explanation for recent trends in state politics, but his chapter offers a careful accounting of the geo-political mechanism that underpins California's recent and unprecedented shift towards Democrats in statewide contests. The chapter does an artful job of connecting *realpolitik* with a grounded theory of political change, and it will be a valuable centerpiece for discussion on state campaigns and elections for any undergraduate or graduate course in state politics.

Readers following Walter's essay on the fishhook strategy may ask how other bases of Republican support in the electoral fishhook have endured. Here, Kenneth Miller and Justin Levitt provide a refreshing shift of focus away from Sacramento and the coastal urban centers of power that dominate so much academic attention on California politics by considering the transformation of political power in the San Joaquin Valley. By documenting the challenges of coalition building between white and Hispanic voters in the state's breadbasket, the analysis succeeds in situating California politics in broader questions of interest to national GOP party activists, who face competing incentives to incorporate socially conservative Latino voters with the traditional white conservative voting block. According to Miller and Levitt, the rising political power of

Latino voters presents a very real challenge to GOP power in the valley. Latinos in the central valley share some conservative values with the regional GOP, yet Republicans have struggled to incorporate these voters. If California's realignment along an East West political divide is to become entrenched, party officials will need to find ways to incorporate rural Latino voters. Placed alongside Walter's essay on the fishhook strategy, this essay underscores the unpredictability of future Latino political incorporation in the state.

While many chapters in this volume focus on state level implications of demographic change in key regions of the state, others focus more narrowly on the implications of demographic shift on urban or municipal politics themselves. Douzet's "The Geopolitical Transformation of Oakland" is a prescient essay on how the increasing multiculturalism of Oakland has transformed the base of political power in the city, undermining the traditional alliance of white liberals and black leaders that had secured African-American political leadership through the second half of the 20th century.

Douzet's essay provides a useful starting point for thinking about the 2010 election of Jean Quan, Oakland's first Asian American mayor, who won just 24% of the initial vote before securing a narrow majority through instant runoff voting.

Although Douzet doesn't specifically engage the question of ranked choice voting, the chapter provides useful context for thinking about how reforms in urban electoral institutions will shape the formation of voting coalitions in multi-ethnic cities. Following a small trend in the Bay Area, Oakland has recently adopted instant runoff or ranked choice voting for its elections, a system that allows voters to rank preferences across multiple candidates, reallocating votes from losing candidates until a single politician receives the majority of the vote. Prior researchers on urban elections have noted that changes from district to at large elections have implications for minority power in city governments, but have so far provided little regarding the implications of ranked choice voting on minority voting power. It is difficult to read Douzet's careful account of demographic change in Oakland without asking how an increasingly multicultural population will approach ranked choice voting, where coalition formation occurs in real time, and difference in turn-out rates may contribute to unanticipated opportunities for new ethnic voting coalitions. Douzet's chapter on multicultural politics in Oakland makes clear that an understanding of demographic change is crucial for understanding the implications of ranked choice voting and other voting reforms for local political power.

The remaining chapters in this section provide succinct case studies of geo-politics of local and regional govern-

ments in California that will hold the interest of more specialized readers. Raphael Sonenshein and Mark Drayse's chapter, "The Political Geography of Coalitions in the Age of Immigration: The Case of Los Angeles," stands as a nice companion to Douzet, assessing how urban voting coalition patterns emerge in a city experiencing rapid changes in demography and voting registration. Gerald Billard and Emmanuelle Le Texier's essay on gentrification and neighborhood politics in San Diego purports to reverse the conventional wisdom that "ethnic minorities are supposed to have less influence on urban development and are therefore less likely to benefit from change," (130) demonstrating instead that "traditional tools of evaluation of political participation (such as electoral behavior, political parties, unions, formal organizations, etc.) miss some forms of participation chosen by excluded people" (139). It is a nice reminder that local political power can take shape across a number of formal and informal dimensions, and like all other chapters, this work will satisfy the reader with careful historical detail that explains the intriguing politics of land use and urban development in San Diego.

The final section of *The New Political Geography of California* departs from the careful documentation of changes in the state's geo-political trends towards a more expansive set of essays exploring the political implications of the new political geography of California.

At the outset, William Chandler and Thad Kousser provide an interesting case study of direct democracy and the evolution of Schwarzenegger's leadership style. The essay works both as a condensed review of the Schwarzenegger administration and as a study of executive leadership and political power. By documenting both Governor Schwarzenegger's unorthodox rise to power and his early losses in statewide initiative reforms, the chapter does much to explain the governor's uneven leadership through his two terms as the state's chief executive. Current readers may find the discussion of Schwarzenegger's heavy-handed use of direct democracy interesting in light of Governor Brown's diplomatic negotiations with Republicans in the state legislature to place a temporary tax increase referendum before the voters.

Picking up on the political implications of the state's changing demographics, three chapters address the question of representation and elections in California politics.

Bruce Cain, Iris Hui, and Karen Mac Donald's chapter "Sorting or Self Sorting: Competition and Redistricting in California?" engages the question of gerrymandering in California politics, asking if the dearth of competitive federal and state voting districts in the state are the result of political sorting of voters into homogeneous voting districts, or the consequence of the self sorting of voters who prefer to reside in districts with people of similar backgrounds and ideological preferences.

This is an entertaining chapter that succeeds in encouraging the reader to rethink the causes and problems associated with safe seats and low party turnover in California's elections. Drawing on a series of redistricting simulations—some falling within current federal and state districting guidelines, others violating these rules to expand potential competitiveness—Cain and his coauthors suggest that California's declining levels of political competition can be explained by self-sorting of constituents rather than the machinations of political power. They write; "The state's competition level is a function of both sorting and self-sorting. Due to the latter, even plans that ignore constitutional and good government criteria for the sake of competitiveness still leave well over half the state in safe seats. The sources of electoral safety to a greater degree lie in our choices to live with like-minded people in socially homogeneous areas" (262). This is a sobering reminder for readers who would like to see increased turnover across congressional and state legislative districts.

Morgan Kousser's chapter "Has California Gone Color Blind" returns to the questions of representation and turnover in elections, albeit from a much different perspectives. Kousser begins with a recurring theme in *The New Political Geography of California*—that the most striking trend in recent decades has been the rise of Latinos to political power. Kousser's primary concern in this essay, however, is to understand the challenges to descriptive representa-

tion in California, with special attention to questions of minority electoral success in Democratic assembly districts. The chapter evaluates the extent to which California's growing Latino representation has been spurred by an increased willingness of white voters to support Latino candidates, stronger minority voting coalitions, or simply the growth of registered Latino voters. Distinguishing between these competing hypotheses, he argues, has real implications for establishing whether national and state level "safeguards against racial discrimination in politics can be relaxed without fear of ethnic strife and with confidence that all voters will have equal opportunities to elect the candidates they most prefer" (268).

Like the other more successful chapters in this volume, Kousser's essay takes an interesting approach to challenge the popular wisdom of the new political geography of California. Drawing on electoral data from Democratic assembly districts, Kousser carefully documents the instance of racial crossover voting among white, Latino and other minority voters. The growth of racial crossover voting cannot fully explain the rise of Latino representatives in the state. Indeed, Latino and other minority representative continue to need stronger bases of in-group ethnic support in order to be viable candidates for election.

Writing on the popular notion that the GOP's decline was fueled by anti-immigrant legislation, Sam Abrams and Morris Fiorina provide a welcome examination of one of

California's more persistent political narratives, challenging the conventional story that the decline of the state GOP can be traced to Governor Pete Wilson and the Republican Party's highly visible support for proposition 187, California's polarizing initiative limiting access to state social services to undocumented residents. It is an odd assumption, they argue, that endorsement of an initiative that enjoyed strong and widespread support from the larger public would lead to an erosion for Republicans in numbers sufficient to make them a permanent minority. Instead, Abrams and Fiorina suggest that Republicans have drifted from the platform that appealed to California voters through much of the 20th century—when the party sponsored fiscally conservative economic policy with socially moderate proposals that appealed to middle of the road voters. Beginning in the 1990s, the GOP has instead endorsed a series of more radical cultural and social policy proposals that pushed the party away from median voters, leading to increased number of “decline to state” voters, and producing more conservative top of the ticket candidates who do not appeal to California's moderates.

Of course, in the current budget climate, it is hard not to wonder if producing an ideologically conservative and highly disciplined minority party comports perfectly with the GOP agenda for the state. Government reforms of earlier generations have made it possible for the state GOP to exercise a good deal of influence over the state's agenda

without controlling the state capital, and as others have argued, social policy may be secondary to a fiscal agenda directed towards shrinking the size of the state—even if this agenda is to the right of the state's median voter. As Fiorina and Abrams note, Republicans would likely make inroads in California elections if they again nominated moderate, fiscally conservative candidates for the general election, however it is unclear if primary voters or party officials desire to or are prepared to shift leftwards at the expense of true party discipline.

For its many strengths, *The New Political Geography of California* is largely a work of political demography, and the volume raises a number of compelling questions regarding how the transformation of California's political geography shapes the functioning of political institutions and the development of public policy that one hopes the editors will revisit in subsequent editions.

First, although the initiative process works as a backdrop in many chapters, the actual institution of direct democracy receives relatively little treatment in this edition. This is surprising, as there are clearly geographic implications of the initiative system, and California stands apart from many other states that have imposed a geographic distribution requirement for qualifying ballot propositions for the general election. Advocates for reforming direct democracy in the state may wish to know how geopolitics structures the ballot initiative industry. Many reform

proposals hinge on increasing the number of signatures needed to qualify a ballot proposition, but the question of geography has received only cursory attention. Future researchers could add a lot to the ongoing debates over constitutional reform by providing a perspective on the geographic strategies employed during signature gathering and ballot initiative campaigns.

More importantly, although the book addresses political geography, it doesn't engage how demography and geography shape public policy—either in the allocation of natural resources or the disbursement of distributive and redistributive policies in the state. Yet as the pitched battles over budgeting demonstrate, one persistent and critical question for California is how the state structures the distribution of resources. Inland voters resent Sacramento and coastal cities, while progressive coastal voters suspect inland counties may constrain budgeting while actually receiving a disproportionate share of the state's resources. Future research on California's political geography should consider redistributive politics. Similarly, the next volume may wish to document how demographic transformation contributed to regional burdens in provision of water, energy or other natural resources.

Finally, for all the ways that California's geopolitics has changed, it is hard not to wonder in what ways old North/South divisions persist. Californians retain a sense of the classic regionalism, and for all the demographic

similarities between northern and southern California, strong cultural, social, and political differences persist. Old rivalries between North and South may endure, and the new political geography of California has almost certainly retained parts of the old. As Dan Walters asserts in his chapter, change in California is a constant, and it is difficult to know at this juncture whether the political change observed in the volume represents a fundamental realignment of state politics, or merely a moment of disequilibrium. The authors of the volume have made a strong case that the demographic shift over the last 30 years represents more than a temporary shift, but one suspects that old regional differences will reemerge over time.

As with all edited volumes, there is always room for addition, but the current edition provides a valuable resource for researchers and academics interested in recent developments in California politics. The volume not only challenges conventional wisdom, but succeeds in shifting our focus on political geography away from the most general picture at state level, and towards more refined and ultimately more interesting questions about regional changes in the Golden State. I pair this volume with Sandra Bass and Bruce Cain's *Racial and Ethnic Politics in California*, Gerald Lubenow's *Governing California*, and Peter Schrag's *Paradise Lost* in my upper division California politics course at San Francisco State University. From the

opening essay, the book provides a great starting point for a semester of rethinking politics in California.

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