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Many visitors to the United States find our system of government confusing, especially those folks who come from places that have a more hierarchical form of authority. In China, for example, the governor of a province would not say, publicly, that the top official in China's government was an idiot or a buffoon, that he was incompetent, or that the central government should not impose its policies on a remote province. I suppose a Chinese governor *could* say such things, but then we might not hear from that person again—central authorities would make that person suffer, perhaps even disappear from office or just disappear. In some countries, saying things against a central authority is dangerous. About fifteen years ago, when I said in class that American law and policy had been inflected with white supremacy for most of American history, a Chinese student caught me after class and asked, “Can you say stuff like that? Won't you get in trouble?” Well, no, at least not in 2008. The exchange made me think, though, that whatever the faults of the United States, I'm more intellectually free here than in many other places, and in an environment where robust criticism is the norm, not the exception.

Still, if you're not used to this system, it's confusing, how the federal government of the United States can pursue policies so different from the fifty state governments, which in turn don't really “control” their local governments. They often do their own thing. Sure, central governments can try to influence and even to punish local jurisdictions, but that takes a lot of work, and many officials decide that it's not worth it. Moreover, criticism of every level of government—coming from every other level of government—is common and unrelenting: Presidents of the United States openly complain about state governors; state officials often can not stand their federal counterparts; and local officials say mean things about federal and state officials all the time, 24/7.

If President Trump arrested every public official who has, up through today, called him an idiot, a moron, an imbecile, a twit, or some other similar insult, a good portion of our public officials would be locked away, including perhaps members of President Trump's own cabinet. Our jails would be bulging. Curiously, the people left un-arrested in his own administration might be the least gifted. To an authoritarian government in another part of the world, this cacophony appears like an underlying weakness—the Americans never seem to agree about anything, and there doesn't seem to be any respect for authority or hierarchy within this system. An authoritarian in some other country might even feel sorry for President Trump, berated as he

has been, every single day, and that authoritarian might recommend to President Trump an alternative system where he might quiet his critics. Authoritarian rulers do not like elections: in the United States, every two years, for every conceivable public official vested with political power, people vote, and politicians are expendable at these regular intervals. To an authoritarian, few things are as annoying and troublesome as the next free and fair election.

Of course, if you've grown up in the United States, and if you've known nothing else, this all appears normal. I'm inclined to think it's quite ingenious: Americans never have to wait very long for the next election, the next set of political contests that might yield an entirely new set of public officials. Meanwhile, they can engage in withering criticism of existing officials and their policies, and if they don't like laws and policies coming from one level of their government, they can appeal to another level, or yet another. To approve, to protect, and to preserve any particular set of policies will be difficult—perhaps impossibly so—but the system tends to favor the persistent, the organized, and the engaged, these groups of people who will not quit and who will participate until the bitter end, and then persist further onto other ends. Nothing is settled, everything is contested. A well-organized and focused minority will always have an advantage over a disorganized, ill-focused majority, and yet if that majority ever gets its act together, they can change many things suddenly. People who win big tend to get complacent, though, and so if you're a loser now, there's always the hope that you can cobble a majority somehow, either in the near or distant future. In American politics, hope springs eternal. *It is a constant, never-ending cycle.*

And there lies its dangerous, alluring beauty. I hope we will never “fix” these aspects of American democracy.

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In authoritarian systems, officials at the center of power try to dictate the terms of many public debates, such that they come up with, and then enforce, a “party line” or a “standard view” about substantive issues and debates. They try to keep things fixed, especially their own hold on power. In South Korea, for example, when President Park Chung-Hee orchestrated a coup d'état to seize control of the South Korean government, he kept insisting that no one refer to his coup as a coup. He granted that it was a coup, at least at the beginning, but then he didn't like it when other people kept calling his actions a coup. He developed novel accounts instead: the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction had taken control of South Korea's government in 1961, and he just happened to be the head of that. Park argued that he was not a “dictator,” to the point of insisting that the Korean newspapers stop using the words “coup” and “dictator” in all of their reporting. He and his allies arrested people who didn't go along, they held “dissidents” indefinitely, sometimes by calling them “communists,” and then they tortured their opponents before releasing them from custody. Many other critics were not so lucky; some simply disappeared.¹

President Park pursued economic policies that were popular, however, and the country's economy undoubtedly grew with significant amounts of American foreign aid. Park retained power for a decade, and then another decade—American Presidents supported their anti-communist ally, even though in private, they referred to Park as a dictator. The Americans' support and the economic growth in South Korea were tied together; by agreeing to send South Korean troops to Vietnam, for example, South Korea grew even more flush with foreign aid. Everything in South Korea—schools, universities, roads, plumbing, sewer systems, and public transportation—got better. But unlike American Presidents, who were forced to suffer criticism and satire and ridicule, President Park seemed to have a much thinner skin.

President Park became more eccentric: he tried to assassinate his political opponents outright, for example, he didn't like watching television, because he might have to send goons to beat up someone who'd offended him, and he didn't like running for office, and so he considered declaring himself "President for Life." He also didn't like the word "short" in reference to his height, nor would he allow anyone to make fun of him. To rally his supporters, President Park proposed for his country the "Yushin System" in 1972, a kind of "restoration" of South Korean economy and society, and one that implied unity under a benevolent President (him) vested with more power than the National Assembly or the Constitutional Court. By then, he had already been in power for over a decade.

American law professors had helped to draft the South Korean constitution so that it would have three co-equal branches of government, but President Park was revising the thing on the fly, arguing that he and his government should not tolerate so much dissension or "division." When his critics complained, President Park replied that the news coverage of his policies had been "unfair" and "negative"—his friends sent goons to beat up reporters and commentators whom he'd described as his "enemies," and then his friends closed publications that he'd accused of "bias." They were reporting "false stories," President Park said, even when there wasn't anything particularly untrue about them.

Some said that President Park was losing his own grip on reality. Indeed, this is a common problem within authoritarian systems: the person in power tends to surround himself only with people he trusts, people who offer praise and support. The downside of this, though, is that an authoritarian tends to believe only what his friends tell him, such that he simply can't see other perspectives more critical or damning of his behavior. Park became more withdrawn and bitter: an assassin, trying to murder him, killed his wife instead in 1974; he fell into a deep depression; and in politics, he became more unyielding than ever before. Protests roiled the country. By 1978, very few people, it seemed, wanted him to be President for Life after all, and the crackdowns became more violent, more bloody. His stubborn fatalism was reminiscent of *Macbeth*: "I am in blood stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er." In the end, it was one of his own trusted allies who assassinated President Park Chung-Hee in 1979. The chief of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, regarded widely as the most powerful and repressive government organizations, was arrested, tortured, and hanged. It was as if this authoritarian government had toppled itself.

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In recent years, in the United States and in many other liberal democracies, public officials have sought and gained political power by disparaging democratic practices and institutions, including a free press, other co-equal branches of government, and even the legitimacy of elections and of voting practices. Thus, in the United States, it's strange how national politics now resemble the far less democratic allies of the United States, but forty or fifty years ago, when the United States once proposed itself as a democratic model to the world, and people like President Park Chung-Hee of South Korea were saying "no, thank you." Nowadays, toward democratic institutions and norms, leading politicians in the United States, including President Trump, seem to be the ones saying "no, thank you," accusing the press of bias and "fake news," insisting that they're "enemies of the people," and also attacking personally members of Congress and the United States Supreme Court.

The United States is (I hope) still pretty far from the darker turns in South Korea in the late 1960s through the late 1980s, when the right-wing goons tortured political prisoners, students, journalists, comedians, and other "enemies." So far, our own talk-show hosts can still poke fun at President Trump and not be disappeared or cancelled, and yet you have to wonder how and why we've moved so far in this direction. Maybe it's because I was born in South Korea, but when I watch late-night television these days here in America, I find myself worrying for some of our own comics and entertainers. Jimmy Kimmel, Alec Baldwin, Trevor Noah, Seth Meyers, Samantha Bee—if they were working in South Korea in the early 1970s, and if they'd joked about Park Chung-Hee in ways remotely similar to the satire and ridicule that they've poured upon Donald Trump, well, they might all have been "cancelled" already.

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In political science circles, scholars have long debated why liberal democracies turn toward authoritarianism, why and how Germany became fascist, for example, and why liberal democracy never quite took hold in places like South Korea or the Philippines in the decades after independence. Our current politics in America are generating a ton of data for my colleagues interested in these questions, and so if you're a young student who's enamored of these topics, now's a good time to learn more about these debates.

One line of inquiry has been demographic: liberal democracies are most severely tested during times of rapid changes in the economy and in society. When there is no functioning economy, and when political institutions are weak or corrupt, liberal democracies have no chance to establish enduring democratic norms and practices; under those conditions, authoritarian rulers become more popular than the dysfunctional institutions that they propose to over-throw. This was maybe the case in South Korea in 1961 and in the Philippines in 1965. "Strong men" had seized power, they had promised to fight corruption, and yet they undid

democratic institutions and then entrenched corrupt habits and practices. American politicians were not the first to promise to “drain the swamp,” only to create and to wallow in their own swampiness.

Functioning liberal democracies are not immune to similar demographic forces and upheavals: when the economy craters, and when the very meaning of “citizenship” comes into question, even a place with strong democratic institutions and practices can drift or slide toward authoritarianism, sometimes into civil war. In such cases, politicians often target or scapegoat one subset of the population to unite the others, for nothing quite galvanizes a political community like a common threat during times when the stable and the familiar seem to be falling apart. The United States in 1861 was facing a crisis like that—the economy was changing from an agrarian into an industrial one, and white Americans so disagreed about the possibility of African American citizenship that they armed and killed one another.

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Even when things do not devolve into civil war, politics can become violent and chaotic, and people can turn on one another with intense ferocity. It’s hard to imagine another place in the world that experienced more sudden demographic and economic changes as California in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1950, California was about ten million people, over 80% of the population identified as predominantly “white,” and although, by constitutional amendment, women had had the right to vote since 1920, they were not actually voting at the same rate as men until about 1960. (Women still do not run for governors of states or as Congressional representatives at the same rate as men in the United States.) In 1990, however, California was becoming a very different place: it was one of the leading destinations for new immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and Asia, such that California was about thirty million people, but over 40% were now not “white.” Demographers also said that by 2000, California would become the first “minority-majority state,” a place where non-white folks would outnumber the white folks; some joked that it was already happening, that by 1990, a large fraction of “white folks” in California were immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, and thus not quite English-speaking “whites.”

By 1970, women were voting at much higher rates than ever before, and in California, this meant that women were not just voting, but that they were running for local offices as well. Every limb and branch of the state’s government was still overwhelmingly white and male into 1980, but changes were coming. In 1969, Dianne Feinstein was elected to the Board of Supervisors in San Francisco; she became the first female President of that Board in 1978; she served as Mayor of the City within the year, serving until 1988. Throughout the state, women were gaining experience in local offices, then running for state-wide positions five or fifteen years later. They were introducing into the state a dynamic that had not existed before: women were politically active in California, which really was a fundamental and radical shift in the state’s history.

The state's economy was also fast changing over this same period. Since 1942, the federal government had spent billions of dollars in California to build planes, ships, and tanks for the United States military, but when federal policy makers reduced those expenditures, thousands of Californians lost their jobs in the 1980s. California had produced billions in agricultural exports, but when a fiscal crisis hit Mexico in the 1980s, growers in California suffered huge losses when their buyers in Mexico (their fourth largest export market) simply didn't buy as much as before—combined with a more general recession in the United States, growers in California suffered a gigantic downturn for their commodities. Other industries—car manufacturing, clothing manufacturing, even television and film production—were facing competition from abroad and from outside the state, again causing severe economic strains in California.²



When the former Senator from California, Pete Wilson, became Governor of the State in 1991, he did inherit a fiscal disaster. Indeed, California was itself like a disaster movie in those traumatic years: in October 1989, one of the worst earthquakes in the state's history killed over five dozen people, flattened houses, and destroyed dozens of roads and bridges in the Bay Area, and then in April 1992, Los Angeles imploded in the worst riots in American history. People of every race and color were involved in the most expensive mass protests ever, and television footage of Koreans with guns, African Americans with guns, and Latinos with guns—all shooting at each other—was exceptionally depressing. It was as if the people of California were preying upon one another, and the newcomers were especially violent and trigger-happy.



It's no wonder that between 1985 and 1995, California experienced a weird demographic shift—people were leaving. Of the people who stuck around, many were just frustrated and angry, quite livid in fact—among older white voters, the political scientists said, the feeling that California was going to hell in a hand-basket was pervasive, and it was fueling a rather sharp turn to the right. “Multiculturalism” felt like a big mistake. From an empathetic perspective, looking at California through the eyes of, say, white folks who knew the place in the 1950s, California must have felt like another planet, a completely foreign place: in the 1990s, there were Koreatowns and Little Saigons up and down the state; Mexican polka music played from car radios everywhere; salsa was replacing ketchup; and the Los Angeles Dodgers had pitchers named Fernando Valenzuela and Hideo Nomo. White men had dominated California politics and economy since, oh, 1850, and so it must have seemed very novel indeed that women were running for Governor and Senator in California.

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California took a hard-right turn in the 1990s. Governor Pete Wilson insisted that illegal immigration was a state-wide crisis, that illegal immigrants were “invading” the state and consuming more in public services than they were contributing in taxes. His television ads were horrible, apocalyptic. After the Los Angeles riots, Wilson also supported Proposition 187 in 1994, and then Proposition 209 in 1996; the first rule would have rendered undocumented immigrants ineligible for nearly all public services, including access to the public schools, and the second prohibited public institutions from using racial, gender, or ethnic identities “to grant preferential treatment.” Proposition 187 was designed, in part, to encourage undocumented immigrants to “self-deport,” and Proposition 209 was designed to undo affirmative action, the policy that had symbolized a progressive commitment to multiculturalism. Both passed, although only one (209) survived state and federal challenges to become law. As I've pointed out in *Immigration Law and Society*, both measures inspired more challenges to affirmative action, as well as federal versions of Proposition 187 approved in Congress in 1996.

Indeed, portions of the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, all signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1996, evoked

elements of the harsher California initiative from 1994. The impact was almost like a straight line, and Wilson was the first to make those connections between California and the rest of the nation. For a time, conservatives in the state appeared to be on a roll—Pete Wilson defeated Kathleen Brown, a Democrat, in 1994, and he then pressed for cuts to state welfare programs, and he moved to expand the state’s prisons, chiefly by supporting mandatory prison sentences. Wilson had presented himself a tough, law-and-order politician, a figure of national prominence—his governing style and his policies were having a national impact, he noted, and he was among the first Governors to show how blunt (some said mildly racist and anti-immigrant) positions could bolster Republican fortunes in a rapidly changing state. They motivated the Republican base, and California policies inspired by these Republicans were pushing federal law to take a hard stance against immigrants, especially illegal immigrants.

Pete Wilson ran for President in 1996, but he exited the primaries when Bob Dole of Kansas proved more popular with Republicans across the country. Dole asked for, and received, Wilson’s endorsement, but Dole lost to Bill Clinton in that election in 1996. Pete Wilson retired from public service in 1999, at the end of his second term as Governor. This was, in part, because his own pollsters told him that Latinos in California and across the country were about as supportive of him as they would be of the anti-Christ. Especially in California, new Latino voters—including many of the sons and daughters of the people that Wilson had proposed deporting—were registering as Democrats by gigantic margins, and they were never, ever going to vote for people like Pete Wilson. His popularity with African American voters was low, too, and combined with a general aversion for the Republican Party arising among college-educated women and Asian Americans—Wilson seemed to have left his state tilting left.

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In his retirement, Pete Wilson said that he had no regrets for being “tough on crime,” tough on illegal immigration, and tough in general. Yet political scientists in California began to see, toward the end of his administration, the beginning of the end of the Republican Party in state-wide politics. Political scientists who analyzed voting noted that Wilson had drawn tremendous support from older white voters—they turned out in droves, highly motivated by his policies. He was especially popular among rural white voters, and in some of those counties, Wilson got a whopping 70% of the vote. He was not so popular with other portions of the state’s electorate, however: his support among women voters was considerably lower, and only one in five African Americans, one in four Latinos, and slightly less than half of Asian American voters supported Wilson in 1994. They supported him even less in 1999. Urban areas supported him at far lower rates than rural districts. In fact, with urban voters, women, and people of color, these were some of the lowest margins for any Republican incumbent in the state’s history. And scholars had a better sense of *why* these voters were avoiding the Republican Party: in surveys, voters said that the Republicans appeared to be unconcerned with inequality and poverty, they seemed outright hostile to immigrants and to people of color, and they seemed uncomfortable

with the changing status of women, as well as with the assertive political activism of gay and lesbian folks.

Now, if you were a forward-thinking Republican strategist, these studies and their findings were alarming, the obvious reason being that there were simply going to be more urban voters, women, African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and LGBTQ voters in subsequent elections, for as far as the eye could see. That is, Wilson did best among a core group of voters that was *shrinking*; he drew the least support among those very portions of the electorate that were growing the fastest. In a state destined to be the first minority-majority state in the United States, Wilson may have been the last gasp of this kind of conservative Republicanism, like the high point of a roller coaster before it plummets. If you were a forward-thinking Republican strategist *outside* of California, you'd wonder whether Wilson's campaigns and policies were worth recommending to the rest of the nation, if, in fact, the nation was about to experience the same demographic shifts that had been occurring within California.

If you were a Republican, you could perhaps win here and there, but the broad demographic trends were not in your favor. Some senior Republicans knew that these trends were dangerous for their party in the long run—President George H.W. Bush promised a “compassionate conservatism,” and government support for a “thousand points of light,” by which he meant religious and civic organizations who would work for the common good, and to help the poor and the less well-off. In 1990, President Bush signed new immigration rules that greatly expanded the number of highly-skilled workers coming to the United States, without any hint that these rules would be imposed or applied with racist criteria. By 1995, every region in America that had had a high technology sector was surging with highly educated immigrants from Asia. Indeed, President Bush approved a rule that made some regions of the United States more Asian, really Asian, super Asian. Many Republicans felt that because these immigrants earned higher incomes, and because they owned their own homes and paid relatively high tax rates, they were likely open to popular conservative appeals about lower taxes, less regulation, and smaller government.

By 1995, Asian American ethnoburbs grew like mushrooms. Monterey Park was not a novel, one-off place where professional Asian folks were replacing older, more conservative white residents. Not everyone was thrilled. Clearly, in the early 2000s, California remained a polarized place—Governor Gray Davis, a Democrat, succeeded Pete Wilson, but then Davis became the first governor in California history to be “recalled,” essentially fired, in a state-wide referendum in 2003. Liberals thought Davis was too conservative; conservatives thought he was too liberal. Davis considered himself “practical” and “pragmatic,” but being lukewarm in a polarized state proved politically fatal. His successor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, promised to be tough and strong, just like many of his characters in the movies, but he too had a hard time governing. Conservatives did not like how he had approved new expansive regulations to fight climate change, or how he had supported gay marriage and he was pro-choice; he also happened to have married into one of the most Democratic families ever, the Kennedys, and so no one

thought it surprising that he appointed Democrats into key staff positions and socialized with lots of Democrats. Some Republicans complained that Schwarzenegger was a closeted Democrat.

Besides, by 2000, California's legislature—its Senate and its Assembly—was so Democratic that Republicans did not bother to field opposing candidates in many districts. Why bother losing? Sending a Republican to run in, say, Berkeley or West Los Angeles was like sending a lamb to offer leadership to a pack of lions. In rural areas, in places where voting was still primarily white and male, Republicans did fine, but everywhere else, the state was turning into a deeper, darker shade of Democratic blue. Because new state rules almost always originated from the Senate and Assembly, Governor Schwarzenegger was essentially signing new laws coming from the other party. Still, Democrats didn't much like or trust Schwarzenegger, because he was, after all, a Republican, but then Republicans didn't like him either, because he gave Democrats so much of what they'd wanted. Photographs of the Governor relaxing with the Kennedys in Massachusetts—well, many Republicans didn't like those. When he left office, Governor Schwarzenegger was less popular than Gray Davis during the year that Davis was recalled. Alas, as he left office, his marriage suffered, too.

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Since 2010, Republican candidates for state-wide office have had almost no chance of being elected in California, a trend unlikely to change for the foreseeable future. Both of California's Senators are women—it's been that way since 1992, and by most national measures, Dianne Feinstein and Kamala Harris are left and left. In 2018, the most significant challenger to Senator Feinstein has been Kevin De Leon, who is "progressive," not so much a liberal. That is, he's more left than Feinstein, closer to Bernie Sanders, and De Leon offered himself the leader of the Resistance against Trump, as though he were Luke Skywalker himself. De Leon criticized Feinstein for saying that she could "work with" Donald Trump shortly after the election of 2016. This was blasphemy! Dianne Feinstein will likely win, but De Leon and others have still regarded her as not left enough.

In 2016, Kamala Harris became the first biracial Asian American and African American woman to sit in the United States Senate from California or, for that matter, anywhere in the United States—her presence there is truly historic and unprecedented, and yet enthusiasm for her victory was dampened by the fact that she trounced a Latino woman



for that seat. They were both Democrats, as no Republican candidate was remotely competitive in the California Senate race in the year that Donald Trump became President in 2016.

Indeed, in California, all of the favored state-wide candidates in the 2018 midterm election were Democrats. Many were Latino and Asian, with names like Becerra, Yee, Ma, Lara, Hernandez, and Padilla. True, the leading candidate for governor, Gavin Newsom, was a white guy, but he was the former mayor of San Francisco, the first mayor to marry gay and lesbian couples in his City Hall before that was technically legal. To a Republican Christian conservative in Yolo County, Gavin Newsom was a city slicker—a progressive metrosexual, urbane in a bad way, dressed just so, his hair and teeth perfect, and thoroughly and hopelessly a Democrat. For rural conservative voters in the state, Republican candidates were still an option, and they did win seats in the Assembly and in the Senate, but no one expected the Republicans to control the Legislature any time in the near future. Some Democrats joked that the Republicans in the state government were not quite irrelevant, but that they were pretty darn close. In 1994, the Republicans who seemed so dominant and invincible were grumpy spectators not two decades later. Thus, in retrospect, the political scientists were probably right: Governor Pete Wilson's campaigns were very likely not the start of a new day in California, but rather like the sun at noon. That sun had been now slowly, inexorably setting on the Republican Party. As to when their bedtime will end, no one can say.

With about forty million people, California was by 2018 the most populous of the United States, with an economy that was the fifth largest in the world, bigger than Great Britain's. No one in 1970 had predicted that the tech economy would be as gigantic as it was now—hundreds of thousands of nerd geeks from all over the world were designing complex machines and microprocessors that revolutionized manufacturing, trade, and communication of every kind, and they were doing much of that work in California by 2000. Tech-intensive, highly-skilled manufacturing fueled a lot of economic growth, as did booming trade relations with Asian countries and with Mexico, but older established sections of the economy, including construction and agriculture, survived the recessions and grew, too. Without question, low-wage, unskilled immigrant laborers were part of that economy in California, despite dozens of new federal and state rules designed to limit or to eliminate them from these sectors. In 2010, at least 2.5 million people in California were out of status: about 50% were from Mexico, about 25% were Central American and South American; about 15% were from Asia; and the remaining 10% were from Europe, Africa, and Canada. (Yes, we have illegal immigration from Canada.)³

California public law shifted in the last two decades to account for people who were out of status. Through Proposition 187, California may have inspired some of the harshest immigration rules in American history in 1996, but over time, state and local politicians in California were among the first to reverse course, with such speed that could give you whiplash: in 2001, this state was among the first to pass new rules that allowed undocumented students to matriculate at the public colleges and universities; in 2011, these students could apply for state financial aid. By 2010, many California cities had declared themselves “sanctuary cities,” and leading law enforcement officials, including the police chiefs of San Francisco and Los Angeles,

said that their officers would not report undocumented immigrants to federal officials during the course of “routine” law enforcement contacts. The state that gave us rioting, social chaos, multi-racial violence, and anti-immigrant hostility was now the same place that delivered mind-boggling prosperity, holistic review, race-based tolerance, sanctuary cities, and resistance to mass deportation. In less than one generation, California had gone from a nativist, Republican Red, to an inclusive, Democratic Blue.

It’s one thing to favor policies of exclusion, quite another to impose them. Local public officials in California were among the first to see and to feel what mass deportation would look like. Police officers in Los Angeles, for example, might pull over a driver for having an outdated registration sticker in 1998, but then a few calls later, the motorist would be in a city jail, and a few hours after that, he might be in a federal detention facility awaiting removal. His kids would wait for him at their school—who was going to pick up them up? When Californians had imagined the “illegals” as a hoard of faceless people, criminalizing all of them and removing them seemed like a good idea. But when one was face-to-face with an immigrant family, and when their individual members appeared so similar to any other family, with many hours centered around jobs and schools and churches, deporting one or dozens can harden the heart. Deporting many such people can break it. Multiply these instances over thousands of times, across many regions, and it’s not difficult to see how many people in California were wondering whether this was, in fact, good policy. In many jurisdictions, the public officials refused to do it.

That is, by 2005, most California residents knew that the vast majority of immigrants were not “criminals” or depraved people—one common observation, for example, was that the safest drivers in the state might well be undocumented people, because they had tremendous incentives to drive under the posted speed limits or to come to a full and complete stop at every stop sign. The dopey American teenager would get a ticket for these minor infractions, but an undocumented person could get deported. It seemed strange that public law would produce and enforce such radically different outcomes for the same basic offenses. This was how some legislators said that all “residents” should be able to apply for drivers’ licenses, and so in 2013, California became the first state to allow undocumented immigrants to apply for state drivers’ licenses. California was again leading by example: by 2017, eleven other states had passed similar rules, just as they were passing their own rules to offer in-state tuition, aid, and access to public colleges and universities. California was inspiring lefty policies all over the country.

In an odd way, the state’s policies toward the undocumented were coming to a strange equilibrium: undocumented immigrants who were convicted of serious crimes were still handed over to federal authorities for deportation, but if someone was not a suspect or a convict, if an immigrant held a job or went to school, state officials were not rushing to round them up and remove them as though they were all criminals. Indeed, state officials were speaking of all immigrants—irrespective of their status—as though they were fellow residents, and thus people entitled to the same basic protections as other residents of the state. This was a remarkable turn, more remarkable still if we consider how these changes continued even after 2008, when the state and the country experienced one of the worst economic recessions ever. Professors at the

leading universities (including UCSB) were publishing scholarly books (like mine) trying to make sense of these developments, suggesting (as in this very essay) that California's past and present were similar, somehow, to the nation's present moment, that maybe the nation's future might be foreseeable in California's present.

In 2016, Donald Trump and his Republican Party seemed to be ascendant, powerful, and on the rise, and yet its base was doomed to shrinkage, its demographics not favorable for a future when women, progressive white folks, people of color, metrosexuals, LGBTQ folks, and many others were getting madder and more numerous at the polls. Trump did not even receive a majority of votes in 2016, which already eroded the legitimacy of his election even before his first day in office. If more Latinos, African Americans, Asians, and college-educated women had just simply voted in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan, in patterns similar to the way they'd voted in 2012, the outcome in the electoral college in 2016 would have been very different indeed. Trump won in large part because white voters—many of whom did not recover economically from the recession of 2008—were turning away from the Democratic Party. And many Democrats refused to vote for the first woman to run for the Presidency. Since he became President, Donald Trump has been recommending his brand of politics to the Republican Party, with all of its anti-immigrant and dog-whistle racism—is such a pathway wise or prudent for Republicans nationally?

If American democracy survives, if voting and aging and other normal changes in our democracy unfold as they have in the past, then Democrats and progressives might enjoy, as they did in California, a perpetual, uncontested period of political dominance after the sunset of Trump. If immigration and demographic trends continue to unfold as they have, if college-educated women and suburbanites move left as they did in much of California, the United States might become just like California. And people in Iowa or in Idaho who don't like these changes—who see in them an existential shift in the very character of the United States—well, they would have good reasons to worry. They may be relegated to the position of spectators, in a country emerging that was entirely different from the United States of the 1950s.⁴

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And yet nothing is certain: when the numbers have not been in their favor, authoritarian rulers have often resorted to undemocratic means. Shut down the press, stuff the ballot boxes, disqualify people likely to vote or to run against you, suspend the constitution, declare yourself President for Life—the list of dirty tricks is long and sordid indeed, and its practitioners stretch from Russia through Turkey and Asia, and across Latin America and into Africa. We Americans might like to think that we're special, that such things couldn't happen here, but alas, Americans are not that special. This country's history is shorter than many dynastic reigns in other places, and for most of its history, the United States has been a white supremacist oligarchy, not so much a multi-racial democracy.

For better and for worse, we are now a modern multiracial state, one where women have been legally entitled to vote for less than one hundred years, and where people of color started voting less than five decades ago. What we are is very new, quite novel, and it would naïve indeed to think that such new things can survive without a fight. That struggle is profoundly existential, it cuts to the core of the nation that we are *now*. We are more like South Korea than most Americans might realize—just as that country is a new liberal democracy, where most everyone votes, including women, people of all class backgrounds and regions, so are we as well. But what a cruel and ironic joke it would be if South Korea remains democratic while we slide into something else. In my darker moments, I don't think that joke is funny at all.

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But I would like to think that it'll go well. I live in California, after all, this very blue state, with its high taxes, crazy expensive housing, and other profound problems. This state has many faults. It has many intractable problems, and a drive through Los Angeles or a traffic jam in San Francisco can make any reasonable person wonder how this state will ever solve its chronic congestion and crowding, its constipated public infrastructure addicted to cars. Inequality is also evident everywhere, in the number of homeless people, in the length of peoples' commutes, and in communities segregated by wealth and income. A massive fire in a homeless encampment consumed several expensive houses up the hill in Bel Air in 2017, showing just how intimately connected the poor and the wealthy are in California. The state is prone to combustion—the cities smoke from huge fires far away, every summer, every fall, perhaps now every winter and spring, too. Even though Californians spend more on public assistance than most other states, and it has some of the most vibrant philanthropies and civic organizations, the state's social problems are also formidable indeed. For many millions of people, California is no paradise.

And yet this place functions and it thrives. It's not cratering economically, there haven't been mass race riots in almost thirty years, and state and local officials resemble the population of the state more than ever before. Police chiefs, fire captains, and local officials are women or people of color, sometimes both, and the younger Californians have to be taught that this is not typical of California history, nor of American history—that they think such things “normal” is itself a strange achievement. My own children can't quite believe that Asians were once considered “unassimilable,” maybe because their own dad watches so much football while having beer and chicken wings, but maybe also because *all* of their Asian relatives are so deeply American in subtle and profound ways, just as they are. Their grandpa was once a Republican, and once a very conservative person who'd voted for Ronald Reagan, both Bushes, and John McCain, and yet in the last election, grandpa just couldn't bring himself to vote for *that* Republican.

My kids now attend schools with persons of every hue and color, and they're better, more interesting people because they've experienced others in all of their diversity and variety.

They've learned, as I have, that the creeps, the weirdos, the dorks, the nerds, the dweebs, the sweet, the kind, and the caring—they come in all hues and colors. Just because a person shares the same background as you does not mean that that person is thoughtful, considerate, or sweet; and when people very different from you offer friendship and love, an open heart can bridge all difference. Diversity is hard, but frozen yogurt with your Latina roommate can be a wonderful thing. On my campus, my own students are so different from one another, too—some read and study carefully, others don't seem to read at all, some party sometimes, others party all the time, some are polite, others have no manners whatsoever, some get “baked” and “lit,” others associate these terms with more innocent things, like birthday cakes. I can never predict, by their racial or ethnic backgrounds, which characteristics I will experience in any particular student. They always surprise me.

I hope that I will always be fortunate enough to experience this cacophony, this variety, this version of California. It's such a fantastic place, living on this edge of the Pacific, in an environment that draws so many different people together, and without eroding anything. Santa Barbara is lovely when it's not on fire. The University of California has been through jarring times, like many other institutions in this state, and yet the campuses have become more diverse—for three decades now, the campuses have been run by women, Chinese guys, white guys, African Americans, and Latinas, all the while getting even better and more prestigious. It's a pleasure to teach here.

I wish I could tell every American that on the other end of things, in this place where LGBTQ folks can marry, where women can vote like its normal, where women and women of color are Senators and Representatives, where people of every hue and variety run the state government, where immigrants are treated as residents and not as criminals, things really aren't so bad. You shouldn't worry, there's nothing to fear. We can all get through this. My own students have given me so much hope—when they ace their exams, when they take all of their studies seriously, when they discover and explore new things, they improve not just their own lives, but the lives of everyone around them. Inside their heads are the solutions to our most vexing problems. Ah, they should all wear bike helmets.



Endnotes

¹ For scholarly discussions of South Korea during President Park's tenure, see: *Reassessing the Park Chung Hee Era, 1961-1979* (Hyung-A Kim and Clark Sorenson, eds., 2011), and *The Park Chung Hee Era* (Byong-Kook Kim and Ezra Vogel, eds., 2013).

² For studies of California politics and economy set during this period, see: *The New Political Geography of California* (Frederick Douzet et al., eds., 2008); *Governing California* (Ethan Rarick, ed., 2013); and David Ayon and George Pla, *Power Shift* (2018).

³ I've taken these figures from the Public Policy Institute of California, a non-partisan think-tank with offices in San Francisco and Sacramento. The report is here: <http://www.ppic.org/publication/undocumented-immigrants-in-california/>.

⁴ For the unsettling of white Americans, as well as their sense of estrangement from national politics, see Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2018). My daughter also liked J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), which explored similar themes in an autobiographical way.