The Un-California
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by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

Pennsylvania is many things, it's big, it has millions of people, it has a long and history rich past, and it's politically important, geographically complex, economically diverse, and culturally fascinating. One thing Pennsylvania isn't however: it isn't California.

Of that latter fact, we have been recently and repeatedly reminded as the California political circus known as "the recall" continues to capture national and international attention.

In case you have been spending the summer on Mars or on some other remote location, you will be interested to learn that California is holding a gubernatorial election this fall and yes, that's the same California that held one just last fall and easily reelected Gray Davis.

But it seems the voters--or at least a majority them according to the latest polling--have decided that they have changed their mind. They don't really want Mr. Davis to be governor after all--last fall was just a mistake on their part. And so they are voting to replace him, possibly with an ex-Austrian weight lifter named Arnold.

They can do that in California --and they can do many other things--such as carry on statewide initiatives and referenda, and conduct non-partisan school board and judicial elections. In fact, they can do so many things in California that can't be done in Pennsylvania that the Keystone State probably deserves to be called the Un-California.

How is Pennsylvania the Un-California? Well how much time do you have? The list is a long one, but here are some prominent examples:

Recall California has it--PA doesn't. In California , voters not only can recall the governor, but other state officials as well, including Supreme Court justices. And Californians, always in a hurry, don't have to wait to see if a governor has been recalled in order to elect a new one. They can just kick an elected official out and replace him in the same election. No muss, no fuss. In Pennsylvania , there is always much muss and frequent fuss for any election. But voters can't recall any state officials. Once we call them, they stay called at least until their terms expire.

Initiative In California , voters can petition to put legislative proposals on the ballot, and then vote to pass them--in the process by-passing the state legislature. And Californians do this with wild abandon, piling up initiative proposal after proposal for voters to decide. In Pennsylvania , the lobbyists may pass the state legislature around a little, but no one by passes them. The legislature proposes and it disposes--and Pennsylvanians get their laws the old fashioned way--they wait for the legislature to get back in town to pass them.

Celebrity Politics In California , celebrity politicians are common and even expected. The currently ballyhooed Schwarzeneggar candidacy is in a long line of California celebrities turned politician that stretches from Helen Douglas and George Murphy to Ronald Reagan, Clint Eastwood and Sonny Bono a decades old
habit. Pennsylvania by contrast fills few of its political jobs from central casting. The nearest thing we have to a star these days is Ed Rendell, and the closest we have come to having a genuine celebrity candidate was speculation a couple of decades ago that champion golfer Arnie Palmer might run for governor. Or more recently that football coach Joe Paterno might give up racing around the sidelines for racing around the state as a candidate. How a celebrity politician might actually do in PA is an interesting question--but so far an unanswered one.

Pennsylvania's bona fides as the Un-California can be extended almost indefinitely. California's political parties are weak and often irrelevant. Pennsylvania's are vigorous and always relevant. California's public policy is subject to wide and frequent shifts. Pennsylvania's policy is plodding with small and incremental changes.

California's political life oozes glamour and glitz. Pennsylvania politics is mostly boring, but usually predictable. California is PC personified. Pennsylvania is personified by Joe six-pack and other salt-of-the-earth types. And so on.

Pennsylvania's status as the Un-California is no recent phenomena. In fact, the vast political differences between California and Pennsylvania are rooted in events of the early 20th century. Then a wave of political reform swept much of the nation. The reformers of the era were called the Progressives and they were led in part by middle class urbanites, motivated by a genuine social consciousness, concerned about the concentration of economic power, and frustrated by the boss-rulled political machines of the day.

In particular, the Progressives railed at old style political machines and attempted to reduce their abusive power. Among the major reforms were laws enabling statewide Initiative, referendum, and recall. In addition, judicial and school board elections were made non-partisan, and candidates were permitted to cross-file in more than one primary.

Although Progressivism was a national movement, not all parts of the country were equally influenced by it. California was a major focal point of the reformers and led the way for many progressive movements. California typified progressivism and the movement deeply insinuated itself into the warp and woof of California political life.

Pennsylvania was another story. Progressives had some success here, but by and large the movement was weak. Most of its victories came on the occasions that Pennsylvania's ruling political bosses got careless—or greedy. A good example is the early 20th century state capitol construction scandal—when graft and corruption were rife, and bribes and kickbacks flowed with such munificence that Boss Tweed himself would have been envious.

But generally the Progressive changes in Pennsylvania were surface deep, and they never endangered the boss-rulled politics of the state. True, the state's political bosses did permit some "reforms," but none of these had deep or lasting effect.

The parties were not weakened, the patronage system remained firmly in place, the bosses controlled the elective office nomination process, and no popular involvement in the political process was started, such as initiative, referendum or recall. Nothing fundamental changed.
That resistance to change and to progressive ideas has often been used to castigate Pennsylvania as moribund and reactionary. And sometimes this criticism has been merited. But today, the legacy of the Progressive Era looks different than it once did.

No longer are California and other states that pioneered reforms, such as recall and non partisan elections necessarily being praised as forward looking and modern--while no longer are Pennsylvania and other states that eschewed the major progressive reforms necessarily being disparaged as backward and perverse.

These days, as we watch California increasing struggle to make the reforms work again, we are likely to find more than wry amusement in the remark attributed to Ogden Nash: that "progress might have been all right once, but it has gone on too long."

The California lesson is clear--not all progressive change was progress, nor was all progressive reform good. There is a middle ground, and, in retrospect, Pennsylvania has done a better job of locating it than we might once have thought.

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Politically Uncorrected™ is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2003 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.