

# The New California - Not

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*by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young*

"*Pennsylvania: The New California!*" That jarring headline ricocheted around the nation this week courtesy of CNN, as Pennsylvania veered perilous toward an impending third month of budget stalemate. Make no mistake, the fiscal situation is serious in the Keystone State. Push is rapidly coming to shove. Nonprofits are cutting back drastically, county governments are curtailing programs or borrowing money to keep themselves running, school districts are starting to feel the pinch, and some state agencies are cutting services. And relief is nowhere yet in sight. So yes, it's bad enough.

But it's not California. Not even close. First is the obvious budget deficit comparison. California had a \$24 billion deficit, balanced its budget with no tax hikes, and even made \$16 billion in program cuts.

Pennsylvania's deficit by comparison is a relatively paltry \$3 billion or so, tax hikes are still on the table, and no one is talking about the draconian style cuts California made. Moreover, California's budget troubles stemmed from a genuine fiscal crisis. Pennsylvania's problems are more political and ideological than fiscal; more about politicians positioning themselves for next year's elections than about this year's spending.

Pennsylvania has millions of people, a rich history, is politically important, geographically complex, economically diverse, and culturally fascinating. It is, as author Neal Peirce called it, "a mega state." But far from being "the new California," Pennsylvania is more accurately characterized as the "un-California."

Consider the following prominent differences between the two states.

- **Attitudes about Change:** California has been described as a state of mind. If so then California's state of mind gets changed with monotonous regularity. Surely California, if it stands for anything at all, stands for change - ongoing, systematic, unending change. Change and reform are the recurring mantras of California politics. Pennsylvania, by contrast, is a state of status quo. Change is rarely sought, infrequently welcomed, and always resisted. Reform is usually suspect and innovations fiercely opposed. The recurring mantras of Pennsylvania politics are permanence and persistence.
- **Celebrity Politics:** In California, celebrity politicians are common. Current Governor Schwarzenegger is in a long line of California celebrities turned politicians, stretching from Helen Douglas and George Murphy to Ronald Reagan, Clint Eastwood, and Sonny Bono. It's a decades old habit. Pennsylvania by contrast fills few of its political jobs from central casting. The nearest we have come to a genuine celebrity candidate recently was the 2006 gubernatorial candidacy of former Pittsburgh Steeler Lynn Swann. Decades before that it was speculation that golfer Arnie Palmer might run for governor, or that football coach Joe Paterno might give up racing around the sidelines for racing around the state as a candidate. The Swann race left no auspicious omens for future celebrities running in the Keystone State. He was flattened by the political pro Ed Rendell in the general election.
- **Recall Elections:** California has them, Pennsylvania doesn't. In California, voters not only can recall the governor, but other state officials as well, including Supreme Court justices. And Californians 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, on the other hand,

there is much muss and frequent fuss for any election. In Pennsylvania, apart from certain judges, voters can't recall any state officials. Once elected, they stay elected at least until their terms expire. Or they do.

- **Voter Initiative:** In California, voters can petition to put legislative proposals on the ballot and then vote to pass them, bypassing the state legislature in the process. And Californians do this with wild abandon, piling up proposal after proposal for voters to decide. In Pennsylvania, the ubiquitous lobbyists may pass the state legislature around a little, but no one bypasses 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.
- **Parties and Policies:** 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.

Pennsylvania's *bona fides* as the un-California can be extended almost indefinitely. California's political life oozes glamour and glitz. Pennsylvania politics is mostly mundane and prosaically predictable. California is PC personified. Pennsylvania is personified by Joe six-pack and other salt-of-the-earth types.

Pennsylvania's status as the un-California is no recent phenomena. The vast political differences between the pair are rooted in Progressive Era politics of a century ago when a wave of political reform swept much of the nation. Progressives were concerned about the concentration of economic and political power and frustrated by the corruption of the day.

In particular, Progressives railed against old-style, abusive political machines. Among the major reforms were laws enabling statewide initiative, referendum, and recall. Judicial and school board elections were made non-partisan, and candidates were permitted to cross-file in more than one primary. California led the way for many progressive movements, which ultimately became deeply insinuated into the warp and woof of the state's political life.

Pennsylvania was another story. Progressives had some success in the state, 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 - not infrequent events. But generally the progressive changes in Pennsylvania were surface deep. The parties were not weakened, the patronage system remained firmly in place, and the bosses controlled the elective office nomination process. Most importantly, no popular involvement in the political process was adopted, such as initiative, referendum, or recall. Nothing fundamental changed.

And that brings us back to the notion that Pennsylvania is any sort of new California. CNN and other national media exposing Pennsylvania's budget shenanigans are right to do so. It's deserved and even more, it's needed. Maybe some national attention will inspire the state's recalcitrant politicians to discharge their obligations with more responsibility. But there is still a distinction not to be missed. Pennsylvania is many things - some good, some not so good. One thing, however, it definitely is not: it's not California.

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