

Introduction

California has a tradition of being in the vanguard of public policy, partly because it is the nation's largest state and issues are apt to be clearly drawn, and partly because of its political traditions that frequently gives expression to alternative views much sooner than the give and take in the political arena more common in the rest of country that requires trade-offs and compromises. Political reformers of all ideological persuasions speak out, put up their money, and campaign for votes. They don't always feel the need for the government and its elected leaders to do it for them.

California has also been subject to major changes in the past few years: the in-flow of immigrants from Latin America and Asia particularly -- although by no means limited to those parts of the world; and the shift in an economy that was strongly based on defense and aerospace spending are particularly critical. It is a state of great wealth and poverty. It is home to the nation's second largest city, but it all but defines suburbia and it's agricultural output feeds a good portion of the rest of the country. These changes are, or will be, reflected elsewhere in time. To some Americans, California is itself a foreign country: it is the United States ten years into the future.

The following chapters are designed to give the reader an introduction to critical public policy issues facing California in 1997. The choice of issues is based on the view that there will be -- or should be -- critical decisions made about them in this twelve-month period. Some issues, such as welfare, are "in play" partly because of action by the federal government and still-developing state plans.. Some issues are on-going local problems, such questions of transportation and education. The compilation is not a total list by any means, but it does cover a broad range of policy choices.

This introduction to policy issues is intended for those who would like a brief, easily-accessible overview of the nature of the

issue: persons engaged in both the public and private sectors who are new to them; and students of public policy in general. While the authors have presented their issues in as balanced a manner as possible, their choice of how to describe a problem reflects their professional and personal judgments. It could not be otherwise. The chapters, therefore, should be read as a good introduction for those who need to know something about issues, but they are not the definitive word. The issues are complex, and there are strongly-held views on all sides. That, too, could not be otherwise. If there were agreement, after-all, the solutions would be obvious.

The book begins with an overview of the state's economy and its political environment. It then moves on to transportation, education, immigration, the impact of welfare reform, and concludes with health care. While the notion of "public policy" as a topic presumes there are solutions to public problems, identifying those problems in the context of possible solutions is what makes them current issues. It is, therefore, our intention to publish a similar volume each year, focusing on the issues expected to be current then.

The preface, written by Barbara Nelson, Dean of the School of Public Policy and Social Research, was the keynote address of the Dean to the second day attendees of the December 1996 conference of the UCLA Business Forecasting Project at which all of the papers were presented.

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