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**How Geopolitics Cleaved
California's Republicans and
United Its Democrats**

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Abstract

This article uses political maps to trace the ways in which the geopolitical transformation of California—from a state divided along north/south lines to one split between the conservative inland areas and the more liberal coastal communities—has also changed the state's two parties. Internal divisions within the Democratic Party have become muted over the past 30 years, while the Republican Party has split into two geographic and ideological factions.

KEYWORDS: California, Republican, Democratic, geography, party politics

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How many major parties are there in California? The obvious answer of two, perhaps informed by the fact that nearly every governor in the state's history has been a member of either the Republican or Democratic parties, glosses over the deep, long-lasting cleavages that often divide parties internally. After the Civil War, the "long hair" and "shorthair" factions of the Union Party were at such odds that they engaged in bloody streetfights in San Francisco and Sacramento in 1866. Progressive Republicans fought bitterly with regular Republicans to nominate Hiram Johnson for governor under the GOP banner in 1910, then bolted the party when Johnson ran simply as a Progressive in 1914.

While some of these factions are the ephemera of a single candidate or election, others have been based on a persistent ideological, regional, or social divide. While some can last for a political generation, they tends to be dynamic over the long run, with their shifting patterns teaching us important lessons about California politics. A divide can recede in one party while a gap emerges in another, reshaping the state's electoral landscape and bringing electoral consequences.

Reframed in this manner, the question of how many parties or stable party factions there are in California becomes more interesting and illustrative. If you asked it four decades ago, the answer would be that our state had two Democratic Parties and one Republican Party. One part of the Democratic constituency was composed of the voters living in rural areas or working in solid blue-collar industries, most of them white and many of them almost as conservative as Democrats in the Confederate South. They were sprinkled across the state but located primarily in the Central Valley—by party registration, the most strongly Democratic region of the state in 1970—and in the burgeoning Inland Empire. On the other side of the party split were the more liberal Democrats of urban areas, allied with the civil rights and antiwar movements, usually living closer to the coast. Clashes between the two factions were in some cases symbolized by racial differences, as in the 1973 mayoral contest between Tom Bradley and Sam Yorty, both Democrats. More often, though, they simply reflected the ideological and regional divisions within the party.

Republicans of that era, by contrast, made up a relatively unified party. By the time Senator Thomas Kuchel lost his 1968 Republican primary to conservative Max Rafferty, Rockefeller Republicans had exited the state's political stage. The conservatism of Richard Nixon and Governor Reagan was, by current standards, pragmatic. Social issues had yet to cleave the party base. A Republican in San Jose was not all that different from a Republican in Santa Maria, San Diego, or Sacramento. Party primaries did not regularly divide along ideological lines as the party remained relatively homogenous in ethnic, religious, and political terms.

Today, a strong and lasting divide has emerged within the GOP at the same time that Democrats have unified. The rise of social conservatives as a grassroots movement, a leading funder of campaigns, and a force in setting the party's policy agenda has created a split within its ranks. The two distinct Republican constituencies now occupy different spaces on the ideological quadrant: Fiscally conservative but socially liberal Republicans gaze nervously from country club windows toward their socially conservative copartisans who, though they have not forsaken the tax revolt, possess a streak of economic populism that makes them riled by, for instance, a Wall Street bailout. Social conservatives often live in the Central Valley, where evangelical churches flourish, while socially liberal Republicans reside in the suburbs of the coastal metropolises. Party primaries for statewide offices have become battlegrounds between the two factions, with the outcomes of these contests determining the party's fate in general elections.

State Democrats no longer grapple with such divisions. White voters in the Central Valley have largely abandoned the party, as have blue collar "Reagan Democrats." The party's electoral strength has migrated to coastal areas, where voters liberal in both fiscal and social matters predominate in the Bay Area and Los Angeles and are now challenging the Republican strongholds of San Diego and Orange Counties. Whether they ride in limousines, Volvos, or buses, Democrats in the blue areas of the state share similar policy views. Party primaries are fought over personal allegiances rather than across ideological divides.

In short, the state now has two Republican Parties and one Democratic Party. This factional layering has reversed over the course of a political generation, so how did we get from one system to the other? The story lies in the state's demographic transformation, and is told in *The New Political Geography of California*, an edited volume published in 2008. Though the theme is not explicit in the book, many of its chapters—written by demographers, political scientists, historians, and journalists—explain how migrations and their political implications have reshaped California politics. In the spirit of the book, maps of California elections from both eras illustrate the emergence and disappearance of factional divides within the parties. Finally, the narrative of where California politics was 40 years ago and how it has changed provides valuable lessons for evaluating today's elections.

The Demographic Forces Reshaping California's Parties

The political transformation of California's parties is due in large part to the major demographic transitions that have occurred in the state, changing who lives here and where they live. These shifts have been spurred, in turn, by two changes in federal policy and conditioned by economic forces. Much of California's economy, especially in the southern regions of the state, was once supported by aerospace and weapons manufacturers who won massive federal defense contracts. These contractors employed thousands of white-collar engineers and managers, as well as many more blue-collar production workers. Nearly all of the plants were located in coastal regions, and most of their workers leaned to the right on the political spectrum, especially on pocketbook issues such as defense spending. They provided the Republican Party with a solid voting base that extended from San Diego up through Orange County and into Los Angeles' coastal suburbs (Long Beach, Palos Verdes, and Redondo Beach, where white-collar defense workers lived) and its blue-collar (but still mostly white) neighborhoods in Torrance and the Hub Cities of Huntington Park, Southgate, and Lynwood.

As Dan Walter's chapter,¹ "How the New Los Angeles has Reshaped California Politics," details, these areas were key to the party's electoral fortunes, serving as the hook and barb of the Republican "fishhook" strategy. The party succeeded, from the late 1960s through the 1980s, by capturing votes in a fishhook pattern starting in the Central Valley, where the GOP won support from Republicans in the minority there and from moderate Democrats who crossed party lines. The hook then curled left into the Inland Empire and south, running through San Diego's shipyards and rocket plants, then through solidly Republican Orange County, and finally into the red portions of Los Angeles County. This county, Walters shows, split about evenly between the Republican and Democratic Parties in statewide elections even through the 1988 presidential contest, counterbalancing the Bay Area's liberalism. When the GOP connected the fishhook, it had enough votes to compete and often to win. This geographic pattern helped to shape the party's ideology. It sought to represent voters who worked in similar industries, who wanted to keep taxes low but sent their children to public schools, and whose political choices were driven more by economic than by social issues.

The collapse of the defense industry in California signaled the end of this political system. After helping to win the Cold War, defense industry workers were rewarded by losing their jobs as the flow of federal contracts slowed and factories closed down. Many of them left the state, moving to Arizona, Las Vegas, or the South in search of jobs and a lower cost of living. The state lost over a million white residents to such migration in the 1990s, Frederick Douzet shows in "Residential Segregation and Political Balkanization." Others moved within the state for the

same reasons, settling in the rapidly growing Central Valley towns along Highway 99, the Sierra foothills, or the “exurbs” of Temecula, Santa Clarita, and the Inland Empire. These areas offered cheaper housing, lower crime rates, and more homogenous populations.

Douzet shows that white migration from coastal to inland counties made these areas, already composed of more whites than the state as a whole, even less diverse. White residential segregation has increased dramatically within the coastal counties over the past decade. Partially as a result, the political segregation of Californians has also risen during this period, with registered Republicans more likely to live near other Republicans and Democrats near other Democrats, “with a spectacular increase along that water-inland divide” (Douzet 2008: 63).

The social and political effects of these demographic shifts have been equally dramatic. The population in the inland areas of the state has grown much larger, more conservative, and more closely aligned with the Republican Party. The migration of so many GOP registrants from coastal counties created a critical mass of Republican organization and support, leading to the partisan realignment of the conservative Democrats who already lived there. Many of them switched their registration and their voting patterns in legislative races, just as conservative white southerners began to align with the Republican Party only when enough northern Republicans moved to states like Florida, Georgia, and Texas.² Social life in exurbs and many Central Valley communities has become increasingly organized around large churches. Ariane Zambiras’s research into “Shifts in the Religious Divide” shows that the evangelical share of the population in California’s inland counties has grown steadily over recent decades, while the coastal areas have not undergone such a conversion.

The East-West religious divide that this has created is mirrored in “California’s East-West Political Divide,” the chapter by Frederick Douzet and Kenneth P. Miller shows. In 1980, Democratic registration was nearly 10 percentage points higher in the state’s northern counties than in the southern ones, but the party did no better in coastal than in inland counties. California’s congressional delegation was evenly split between Republicans and Democrats, with the Republican winning 14 of their 21 seats in coastal counties. By 2000, the North-South divide was shrinking while an East-West divide was opening up, with Democratic registration running 10 points higher along the coast than in inland counties. After the 2006 elections, coastal Republican members of Congress and the legislature had become nearly extinct outside of Orange County.

These changes have made the fishhook strategy more difficult for Republicans and changed the party itself. With so many Republicans gone from Los Angeles, the county now delivers the strongly Democratic voting margins that have helped Democrats carry all of the state’s electoral votes since 1992. John Kerry took Los

Angeles by 800,000 votes in 2004, and came within 70,000 votes of winning San Diego County. The Republicans who have remained in the coastal areas are fiscally conservative, but more moderate on social, racial, and environmental issues than their copartisans in the inland areas. They have defected from the party when it has nominated socially conservative candidates or backed contentious social initiatives.

As Morris P. Fiorina and Samuel J. Abrams demonstrate in “Is California Really a Blue State?”, the “mostly likely explanation” of the change in GOP electoral fortunes “is a change in the image of the California Republican Party and a change in the kind of candidate it nominates for statewide office” (p. 302). They analyze geographically the decline in the Republican gubernatorial vote from 1986, when incumbent governor George Deukmejian won 61 percent of the vote, to 1998, when Dan Lundgren captured only 38 percent in his gubernatorial race. The largest drop-offs by county came from San Mateo, Napa, Lake, Solano, Marin, and south to the Silicon Valley, where socially moderate GOP voters were put off by Lundgren’s pro-life conservatism. In an analysis of many elections, Fiorina and Abrams found that the Republican vote declined most sharply in the counties where initiatives like Propositions 22 (banning same-sex marriage) and 73 (parental notification of abortions) did most poorly. Their finding shows that the East-West divide has cleaved the state’s old GOP, composed of socially moderate voters in coastal suburbs, from its more aggressively conservative wing in inland areas, at the party’s overall electoral expense.

Many of the same forces that divided the Republican Party have helped to unify Democrats over this period. The white, rural, conservative wing of the party that inhabited the Central Valley through the 1970s and early 1980s has all but disappeared. These voters, who often split their tickets in presidential elections but backed Democrats in statewide and legislative races, are now consistent Republicans. The Republican percentage of major party registration in the San Joaquin Valley climbed from 37 percent in 1980 to 51 percent in 2000, Kenneth P. Miller and Justin Levitt show in “The San Joaquin Valley: Republican Realignment and its Limits,” as Democrats have lost most of the Valley’s majority-white legislative districts. Democrats have retained support, and held onto seats, primarily in the Valley’s majority-Latino districts, protected by the Voting Rights Act. Importantly, voters in these districts and the legislators they elect lean far further to the left than the Valley Democrats who preceded them, mending a major rift in the party.

The new Valley Democrats have much in common with Democrats from the rest of the state, especially now that the party has an increasingly Latino constituent base and the legislature has a large and influential Latino caucus. When Republicans left the coastal areas after the collapse of the defense industry, they were replaced by immigrants from Latin America and Asia. Allowed in after the Immigration

and Naturalization Act of 1965 eliminated national quotas, legal immigrants in the ethnically diverse wave of migration that has accelerated in recent decades have joined the state's existing Latino and Asian-American populations in preferring the Democratic Party. The level of Democratic support has fluctuated over time, with the party's opposition to Proposition 187 giving it a boost among Latino voters since 1994. Democratic support also varies across Asian-American national origin groups, with Vietnamese- and Korean-Americans being especially linked to the GOP. On the whole, though, the growth of California's immigrant communities and the state's increasing racial and ethnic diversity has expanded the popular base of the Democratic Party.

To the surprise of many, it has *not* yet opened up any major fissures within the party. The more affluent white Democrats of Marin, San Francisco, Santa Monica, and Pasadena have allied with the poorer immigrant communities in Daly City, Fremont, Salinas, North Hollywood, and south Los Angeles in favor of spending on schools and social service programs. Support for civil and immigrant rights has tied both sets of voters with the party's solid African-American base. Slightly divergent views on social issues have not yet separated these groups, although some GOP strategists have speculated that the strong Catholic adherence of many Latinos could shift them into the Republican column when the party emphasizes its opposition to abortion.

While the premise of this argument makes sense, few inroads have been made. Ariane Zambiras's chapter explains why. Latino Catholics are slightly *more* likely than other Latinos to be registered Democrats. When they were polled in 2005 about the most important issue facing people in California, only 0.8 percent of Latino Catholics replied "abortion," compared with 26.3 percent who mentioned jobs or the economy, 12.4 percent who mentioned crime, or 9.3 percent focused on schools. Latino Catholics may differ from the Democratic Party's pro-choice stance, but the issue is not salient enough to create a major division within the party. Perhaps the issue of same-sex marriage will do so in the future, but the polling on Proposition 8 provides little evidence so far. Today, California's Democratic Party has no clearly drawn camps or persistent internal divisions, a fundamental transformation from the state of the party a generation ago.

Viewing Party Divides through California's Geopolitics

The faultlines that divided the Democrats during the 1970s appear clearly on the state's electoral map, drawn to display primary election results. It is in these fights for nominations that intraparty splits emerge, and by comparing maps across parties and across eras we can observe the tectonic shifts of California politics. This sec-

tion provides four maps of primary election returns displayed by county, beginning with a pair of 1976 contests. In each, the darker the county, the larger the margin of victory for the eventual nominee over his major opponent. If the party is mostly unified, most counties should be shaded the same way, indicating similar margins of victory across the state with only a local hotspot here or there. If, by contrast, the party is divided, the map should be variegated, with some geographic pattern in the shading of counties revealing a regional or ideological divide.

Figure 1, displaying the results of the 1976 Democratic senatorial primary, reveals just this sort of a schism. The contest was a bitter one between sitting incumbent John Tunney, a moderate, and the insurgent liberal candidacy of Tom Hayden. Tunney won the statewide vote by a 53.8-36.7 percent margin, but his strength was not uniform across the state. Hayden held his own in all of California's coastal counties, even winning in Marin and Santa Cruz. Throughout Central Valley, though, Tunney dominated, winning by approximate two-to-one margins in Fresno, San Joaquin, Kern, Merced, and down to San Bernardino counties. The East-West fissure which was later to split the state between Democrats and Republicans at that time divided the Democratic Party internally.

In the Republican presidential³ primary that year, Ronald Reagan's victory over Gerald Ford was just as convincing—he won by a 65.5 to 35.5 percent margin—but this margin was nearly even across the state. As Figure 2 shows, Reagan captured every single southern California county by more than 30 percentage points and won convincing victories in all of the inland areas in the north as well. His only areas of electoral weakness were some Bay Area counties, but these did not contain very many Republican primary voters in the first place. The counties that mattered most uniformly backed Reagan over the party's sitting president, a sign of California Republican unity that boded well for the former governor.

Today, the Democratic Party displays this sort of unity, even when its top-of-the-ticket candidates do not perform as well. The party's most recent gubernatorial primary, the 2006 race between Phil Angelides and Steve Westly, was no great battle of ideas. In this respect, it was similar to the 1998 battle for the nomination between Gray Davis, Al Checchi, and Jane Harmon, none of whom occupied a distinct location in the party's ideological territory. As Figure 3 shows, the 2006 contest did not break down along any discernable ideological or partisan lines. Angelides won by 48.0 to 43.2 percent, and, remarkably, his margin of victory was quite consistent across the state. The map reveals no clear North-South or East-West divides. Surprisingly, Angelides did not do particularly well on his home turf in Sacramento, just as eBay executive Westly failed to excel in the Silicon Valley. For Democrats in the state today, primary battles are more about personal appeal and organizational strength than they are about tapping into disparate party camps.

Figure 1. Two Democratic Parties: The 1976 Tunney-Hayden Senate Primary

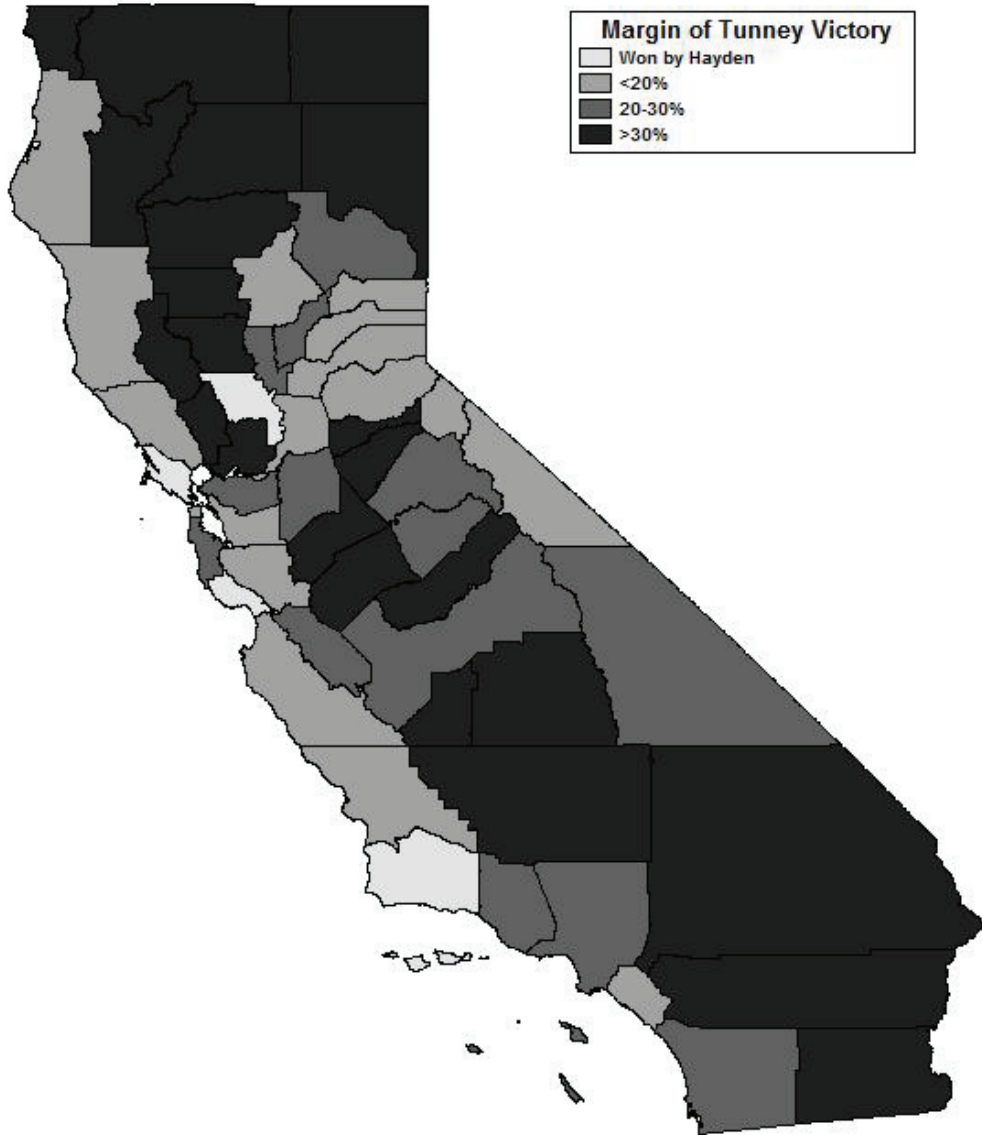


Figure 2. One Republican Party: The 1976 Reagan-Ford Presidential Preference Primary

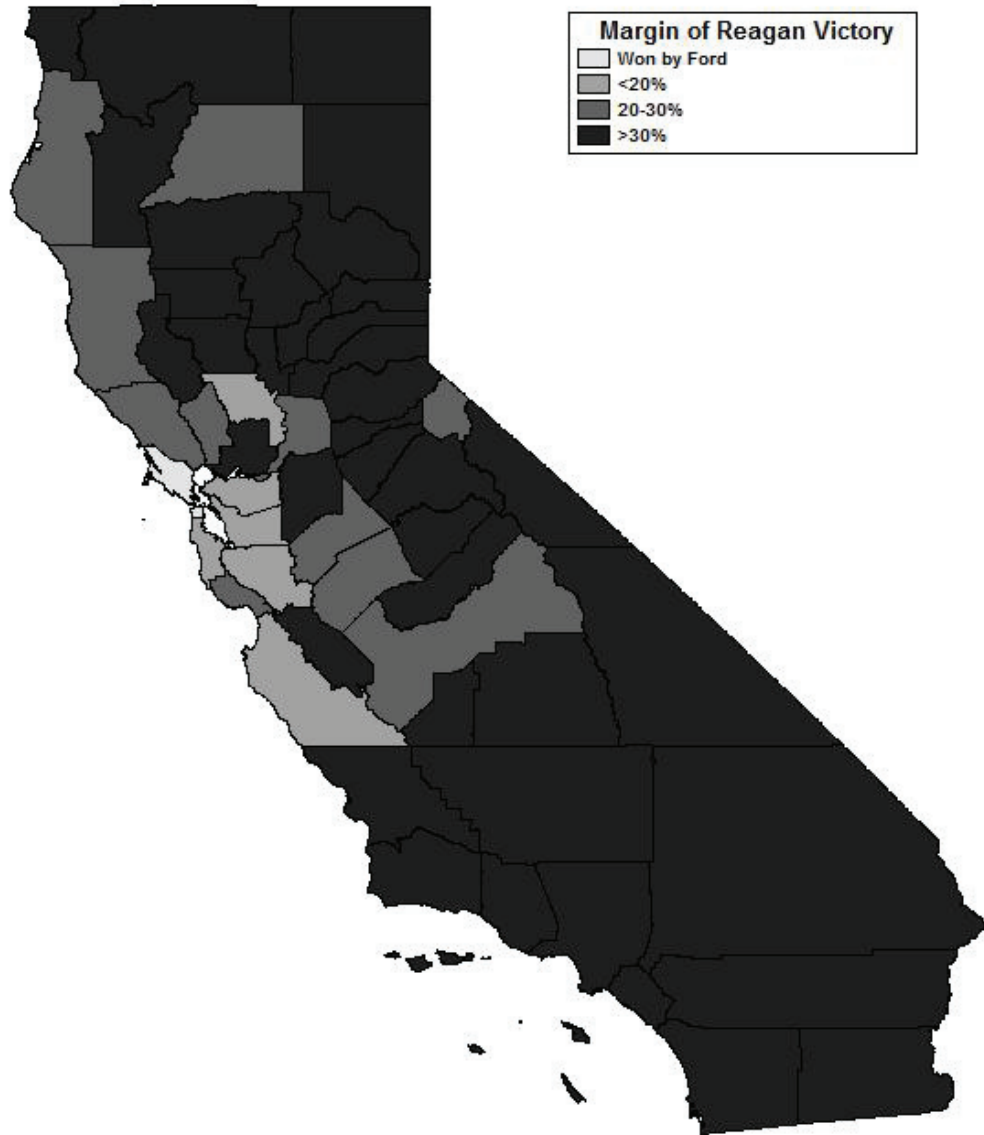
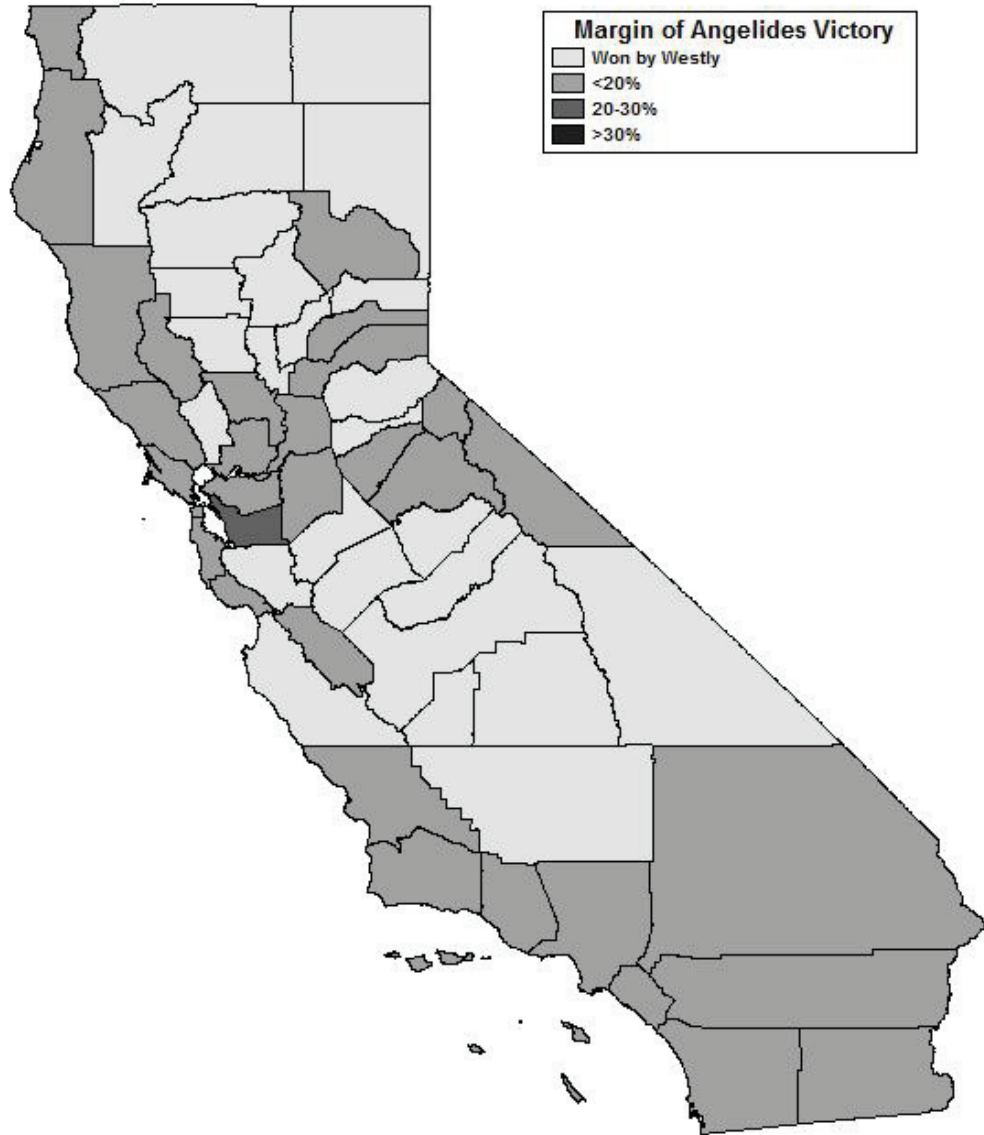


Figure 3. One Democratic Party: The 2006 Angelides-Westly Gubernatorial Primary



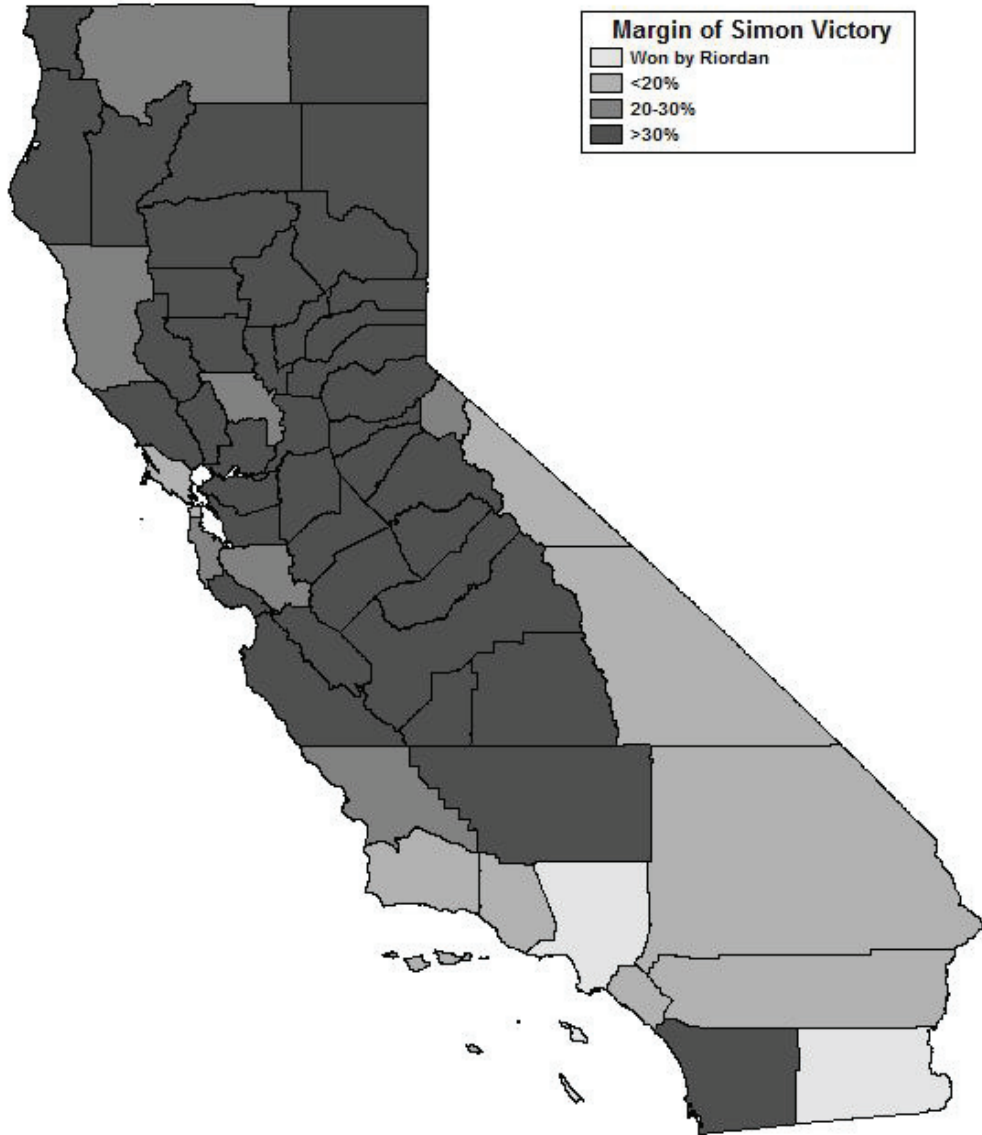
It is so clear that Republican primaries involve exactly this sort of factional fighting that a Democratic campaign was able to exploit it to pull off a notorious political heist in 2002. Popular Los Angeles Mayor Dick Riordan, a pro-choice moderate, ran that year as a clear favorite for the party's gubernatorial nomination against the more socially conservative Bill Simon. While the Riordan campaign did much to harm itself, the biggest blow against it came when Gray Davis, the vulnerable Democratic incumbent, spent \$10 million on a negative ad blitz highlighting Riordan's abortion position *during the Republican primary*. As Davis and his advisor, Garry South, knew, this attention to social issues badly damaged Riordan among social conservatives in the Republican Party's Central Valley heartland. As Figure 4 shows, the Valley and the Sierra counties went overwhelmingly for Simon, as did San Diego. Riordan managed to carry his home county, Los Angeles, and perform decently in the L.A. and Bay Area suburbs, but he lost by a 49.5 to 31.4 percent margin statewide. Simon activated the party's inland constituency, piling up large wins in the conservative areas that helped him overcome tighter margins in the state's more moderate coastal counties. The patchwork pattern of his victory map illustrates today's Republican divides.

The Implications for Today's Elections

Bill Simon's defeat by Gray Davis later that year points toward the major implication of California's current partisan alignment: When candidates representing inland conservatives win the battle for the Republican Party nomination, they lose the general election war. Bill Simon was too far to the right to beat even a Democrat as damaged by the energy crisis and as bereft of charisma as Davis. Simon fared almost as poorly as the party's previous gubernatorial nominee, social conservative Dan Lundgren. The outcome of other ideological primary fights have shaped the GOP's general election fortunes. The 1992 Senate primary between centrist Stanford economist and House member Tom Campbell and conservative talk-radio host Bruce Herschensohn is a case in point; Herschenson beat Campbell in the primary, but eventually lost to Barbara Boxer, to the immense consternation of many moderate Republicans.

Of course, simply nominating a moderate candidate does not guarantee the Republican Party a November victory. The same year that Herschenson lost to Boxer, moderate John Seymour also fell to Dianne Feinstein. But nominating a moderate at least gives the party a fighting chance, and has led to the GOP's biggest recent victories. Republicans have won six of the state's last eight gubernatorial contests, but all of the victors—George Deukmejian, Pete Wilson, and Arnold Schwarzenegger—have been pro-choice candidates hailing from the state's coastal

Figure 4. Two Republican Paties: The 2002 Simon-Riordan Gubernatorial Primary



regions. Nominating moderates can allow the GOP to change the state's political color. California is not a steadfastly blue state, but our shade on the nation's electoral map depends upon how the state's Republican primary map is drawn.

NOTES

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all of the references to book chapters here come from *The New Political Geography of California*, edited by Frederick Douzet, Thad Kousser, and Kenneth P. Miller (Berkeley, Calif.: Berkeley Public Policy Press, 2008).

² The story of how migration from the North started the partisan realignment of the South is told by Nelson W. Polsby's *How Congress Evolves: The Social Bases of Institutional Change* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³ This map covers the presidential preference primary because the vote in the Republican senate primary in that year was split between three major candidates, making it a poor analogy to the Democratic senate primary.