

Preface

The early twenty-first century has not been kind to California's reputation for good government. With a dysfunctional state government and a soaring budget deficit, the state has become the butt of late-night television jokes. Things have fared even worse for local governments. The City of Bell, a small immigrant community located in Los Angeles County, earned national notoriety for allegations of massive corruption and fraud by city officials. The nearby City of Vernon, in the words of the speaker of the California State Assembly, is "a situation where a handful of individuals are able to use an entire city as their own personal fiefdom."¹

In actuality, the Golden State's governance flaws, whether chronic and seemingly irresolvable budget deficits or public corruption, reflect worrisome national trends with origins in the 1970s and 1980s. Growing voter distrust with government and a demand for services but not new taxes to pay for them, a sharp decline in enlightened leadership and effective civic watchdogs, and dysfunctional political institutions ranging from term limits to an initiative process gone awry have all contributed to the current governance malaise.

Some jurisdictions appeared immune to systematic governance disorders. Until recently, such was the case with San Diego, California, America's eighth-largest city. Lauded by antitax activist Howard Jarvis

for its fiscal stewardship and nationally praised as a governance exemplar, this sunny beach town entered the last decade of the twentieth century proudly proclaiming itself “America’s Finest City.” However, the new millennium has not been kind to paradisiacal San Diego. In a few short years, the town’s reputation went from Futureville to Enron-by-the-Sea.² A pension scandal blossomed into a huge pension liability. With a large and seemingly intractable budget deficit, the city teetered toward bankruptcy. A number of public officials resigned from office or went on trial, charged with corruption and fraud. Horrific wildfires revealed the paucity of public services. Paradise, it seems, had been plundered.

This is a study of San Diego’s myriad civic woes. This project began as a political biography of an understudied Sunbelt city. As events unfolded, we sharpened the focus to the City of San Diego’s fiscal crisis and governance failures. San Diego, we believe, is a harbinger for dysfunctional state and national trends related to political culture, leadership, and institutions. The project also can be traced to our active involvement in local civic affairs, ranging from debates about the strong-mayor system to thorny issues involving pension and budget policy, redevelopment, water-supply reliability, and airport development.

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