

‘We Have Run Out of Poor People’: The Democratic Party’s identity crisis in the 1950s

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In September 1957, as former Senator Bill Benton was considering a return to the Senate from his home state of Connecticut, he received some campaign advice from friend and former congresswoman Chase Going Woodhouse. ‘The Democrats need a new line,’ she wrote. ‘As somebody said we have run out of poor people. The Republicans have taken over our entire social security etc. program....At three meetings I have tried out the idea of “conformity,” of the need for angry young men such as were around Roosevelt, of individual freedom to speak and think etc and we reminded the audience that you were the only one with the courage to fight McCarthy at the height of his power. The response has been good. The changes in American life towards conformity and ‘tranquillizers’...has troubled people.’¹ The theme of how to adapt New Deal liberalism to the context of economic prosperity and the realities of the Cold War was also at the heart of Arthur Schlesinger’s 1956 article ‘The future of liberalism: The challenge of abundance’ in which he set out his vision of how the heirs to the legacy of FDR might recast their program for the presidential campaign that year. He argued that what he termed ‘qualitative liberalism’ concerning health, education, civil rights, and urban planning would replace the ‘quantitative liberalism’ of the New Deal. ‘The issues of 1956 are no longer the issues of 1933,’ he wrote, ‘the issues that made the difference between starvation and survival.’ To Schlesinger, the burning question of the day was what he termed ‘the quality of civilization to which our nation aspires in an age of ever-increasing abundance and leisure.’² Leaving aside the fact that these were in many respects rather crude interpretations of the New Deal and its political legacy, it was clear to these liberal observers that Eisenhower’s crushing victory in the election of 1952 and his adoption of what he called a ‘middle way’ politics that accepted elements of New Deal statecraft

¹ Chase Going Woodhouse to Bill Benton, 30 September 1957, Benton MSS, University of Chicago archives, Box 282, folder 5.

² Arthur Schlesinger Jr., ‘The Future of Liberalism: The Challenge of Abundance,’ *The Reporter*, 3 May 1956, in Pat Brown MSS, Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, Box 7, liberalism/conservatism file.

whilst rejecting a planned economy had forced New Dealers to think afresh about what constituted the contours of the political spectrum.³

To Godfrey Hodgson, the author of the term that gave this volume its starting point, these examples of liberal soul-searching for a political purpose were symptomatic of a wider trend in American political life. The triumph of American capitalism after World War Two and the political power of anti-communism in American life constrained the boundaries of political debate and limited the capacity of liberals in politics and the labour movement to expand the New Deal. Intellectual debate became obsessed by the possibility of nuclear annihilation and yet beguiled by what was termed in the Rockefeller study *Prospect for America* in the late 1950s ‘the inherent dynamism in our free enterprise economy.’ This study, heavily borrowed from by the Eisenhower administration in its official report on national goals in 1960, was the product of a bipartisan team of avid New Dealers like Chester Bowles and Adolfe Berle and pillars of the Republican establishment like Henry Luce and Henry Kissinger.⁴ Few could be found who advocated economic policy experimentation practised in the 1930s, and yet equally few in political life by the late fifties denied the absolute importance of national defense and the Cold War as the dominant reality in shaping not just foreign policy but American governance in its totality. In his reply to Woodhouse’s stirring words of advice, advice that had concluded by warning against ‘too much emphasis on our responsibility in foreign affairs,’ Benton noted that ‘the launching of the Russian satellite certainly dramatizes mistakes the Republican administration have been making in cutting back on our defense budget.’⁵ In the context of an international arms race and a political culture in the United States unwilling to countenance the kind of state management of economic growth and public welfare practised in other industrialized countries, Hodgson saw ‘an age of consensus. Whether you look at the writings of intellectuals or at the positions taken by practising politicians or at the data on public opinion, it is impossible not to be struck by the degree to which the majority of Americans in those years accepted the same system of assumptions.’⁶ Politicians with different political monikers or party labels represented different interests – labor or management, say – but did not differ markedly in their overall worldview, which

³ The idea of a ‘middle way’ is set out repeatedly in Eisenhower’s own diaries. See Robert Ferrell, ed., *The Eisenhower Diaries* (New York: Norton, 1997).

⁴ See Godfrey Hodgson, *In Our Time: America from World War Two to Nixon* (New York: Macmillan, 1976): 69-70.

⁵ Benton to Woodhouse, 8 October 1957, Benton MSS, Box 282, folder 5.

⁶ Hodgson, *America in Our Time*, 67.

placed the fundamental strength of American capitalism and its superiority over Soviet Communism at its heart.⁷

Yet we know that more recent scholarship has altered our angle of vision when considering the political history of the postwar era. Looking back from a neoliberal triumph of the post-Reagan period characterized by the collapse of organized labor, the decimation of the New Deal regulatory and welfare systems, and grassroots religious right organising, historians have increasingly seen the 1950s as bearing the roots of a ‘rightward bound’ America that emphasised deep conflict over fundamental questions of political economy and social structure.⁸ Histories of business politics have lent new credence to General Electric’s PR guru Lemuel Boulware’s frank comment to Raymond Moley in a letter of April 1960 that ‘the major labor problem of this country is not with the few bad union officials but with the many so-called “good” ones.’⁹ To those entrepreneurs and economic boosters determined to extend corporate power and to attract inward investment to the growing Sunbelt region, there could be no accommodation with the kind of labor-management pact that had defined the New Deal order. The political tussles over supposed labor union racketeering and right-to-work laws in the 1950s represented more than just a sideshow that masked a deeper agreement over the legacy of 1930s labor laws. The decade saw the start of an all-out assault on the New Deal in which the very legitimacy of collective bargaining as a tool of economic management was at stake.

Historians working from a post-civil rights movement vantage point have also increasingly called into question the usefulness of ‘consensus’ as a tool for understanding the postwar era, even from the perspective of elite politics. Informed by a scholarly awareness of the need to

⁷ Hodgson, *America in Our Time*, 72. The idea that the Cold War and an economics of abundance changed the fundamental character of American political discourse is common in historians’ treatments of the early Cold War period in particular. See Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Knopf, 1995); Jonathan Bell, *The Liberal State on Trial: The Cold War and American Politics in the Truman Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Alonzo Hamby, *Liberalism and Its Challengers: FDR to Bush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Robert Griffith, ‘Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Corporate Commonwealth,’ *American Historical Review* 87:1 (February 1982): 87-122.

⁸ The term ‘rightward bound’ is the title of an edited collection on the 1970s, but a growing body of scholarship sees the mobilization of anti-statist forces much earlier: See Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer, ed., *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Kimberly Phillips-Fine, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: Norton, 2009); Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, ‘Counter-Organizing the Sunbelt: Right-to-Work Campaigns and anti-union Conservatism, 1943-1958,’ *Pacific Historical Review*, 78:1 (February 2009): 81-118; Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Kimberly Phillips-Fine and Julian Zelizer, ed., *What’s Good for Business: Business and American Politics since World War Two* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁹ Boulware to Moley, 20 April 1960, Moley MSS, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, Box 6, Boulware file.

take apart and question the underlying assumptions of political debate, evaluating the language and rhetoric of political actors through a clearly defined analytical lens rather than presenting them on their own terms, a new scholarship has uncovered the ways in which consensus politics has been an ideological tool to hide or control deep-rooted gender, racial, and class divisions in American life. Margot Canaday has outlined the ways in which a ‘straight state’ developed in the wake of the New Deal to regulate and control gender dissent. David Johnson highlighted this theme in his in-depth study of the federal government’s crackdown on ‘sex perversion’ in the early Cold War. Most recently, Marc Stein has uncovered the ways in which Supreme Court decisions since the early rights revolution have been constrained within specific notions of gender hierarchy.¹⁰ To these historians, ‘consensus’ is not arrived at by reasoned debate, nor by political triumph of one party or group over another, but by a policy and legal agenda of coercion and regulation that define who is included and who excluded from the confines of state patronage and acceptance. In this reading, the postwar period was one of a brutal crackdown on social difference in which every word of political debate of the kind documented by Hodgson hid entire categories of people who existed but who were not included in the benign embrace of a land of plenty but policed, surveilled, regulated, and sometimes imprisoned. Private capitalists and New Deal liberals alike had the regulatory power to offer or withhold patronage. It may have been true that the Eisenhower administration ‘accepted that the federal government must continue social security and other such New Deal programs,’ and ‘was ready to enforce due compliance with the law in civil rights, though reluctantly and with caution,’ but the very definitions of who lay within the confines of economic and civil rights citizenship were deeply contested, and any consensus on this point was achieved by airbrushing entire categories of people from the official record.¹¹ Reading American history – of any period – through an interpretive framework of consensus can only be achieved by an unabashed reproduction of the language of elite straight white men, who predominate in Hodgson’s chapter on ‘the Liberal Consensus.’

An investigation of electoral politics that bridges Democratic Party strategizing and grass-roots activism reveals the ways in which liberal ideology and political strategy were evolving

¹⁰ Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); David Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Marc Stein, *Sexual Injustice: Supreme Court Decisions from Griswold to Rose* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

¹¹ Hodgson, *America in Our Time*, 72.

in this crucial decade of the 1950s. While I accept that that consensus politics was a useful shorthand for the suppression of dissent, I also seek to understand how the language of liberal politics was making the transition from a New Deal politics of economic recovery and stability to a rights liberalism that came to serve as a vehicle for translating the civil rights movement into national policy. So my analysis of Democrats – by which I mean heirs to the New Deal in the north and west, using examples from my extensive research on California in these years – constructs a picture of liberal ideas at a crossroads between New Deal economic equality that excluded and controlled and civil rights equality that was forced to question and reevaluate those notions of inclusion and exclusion.¹² The dilemmas of modern liberalism, responsive to sexual, racial, and social difference but also constrained by a limited political lexicon, can be traced back to this crucial period. Bitter electoral battles over the rights of labor and the role of a welfare state acted also as the beginnings of a link for liberals between economic rights and social equality. This link remained tentative and often coded in language that would resonate in a particular time and place, and we need to be careful not to extrapolate too much out of political rhetoric or electoral politics very much designed to win elections, not to act as a carefully scripted harbinger of future social change. But to take Democratic electoral politics of the 1950s seriously is to move beyond an impressionistic portrayal of 1950s politics as a preoccupation of elite actors conjoined in a consensual embrace over fundamental question of the day in favour of a more complex story of how political ideas played out when paraded on a rapidly changing American electoral landscape.

Adlai Stevenson and the California Democratic Party

‘I’m in mourning for the brains of the American people,’ wrote LA resident Eleanor St Germain to Adlai Stevenson in the wake of his electoral defeat to Dwight Eisenhower in November 1952. ‘Because, if they’re not dead, where are they?’¹³ St Germain was one of thousands of Californians who wrote to Stevenson during and after his campaign, excited at his candidacy and mobilized to support him. California’s unique political context made the Golden State peculiarly receptive to his candidacy. There was no organized party structure, but rather a loose collection of political alliances based around individual office-holders and local leaders. ‘There is no cohesion within the [Democratic] party; there is, in fact, no party in the real sense,’ wrote one observer of the California political scene in 1950. ‘What the

¹² See Jonathan Bell, *California Crucible: The Forging of Modern American Liberalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

¹³ Eleanor St Germain to Stevenson, 5 November 1952, Stevenson MSS, Box 115, folder 5.

party consists of is a loose business alliance between various clots of opportunists who congeal about local “strongmen.”...If there were a strong self-conscious liberalism here there would sooner or later grow up a liberal aggressive Democratic Party.’¹⁴ The California Republican Party dominated state politics, controlling almost all state offices in the early 1950s with the exception of the Attorney Generalship. All but three newspapers supported the GOP. Organized labor often supported Republican candidates in order to gain patronage and favors in Sacramento.¹⁵ Without strong central direction, state politics provided a home for extremists on both sides of the political spectrum, and Democratic politics was a breeding ground for a popular front that survived the early Cold War and provided a sense of purpose for Californians actively engaged with issues of the day but frustrated by the inability of the state’s political system to provide an outlet for a strong liberal program. Looking back on the 1950s, a decade that witnessed the growth of a vibrant Democratic organization in California out of the Stevenson campaign, Berkeley professor Paul Seabury reflected that continuous ‘defeat in state and local politics in the past made difficult the growth of responsible state-wide party organization; but it made it possible for the newly emergent Democratic organization in the state to be far more responsive to forces of “modernity” within the party.’ He noted that ‘by and large it is something new in American politics, a broad movement of well-educated liberals whose political cohesiveness derives not from ethnic, or narrowly-based economic interest, but from a deep “concern” with political issues transcending the “self-interest” of the movement itself.’¹⁶ Many of those who came to form the backbone of a rejuvenated Democratic Party in California in the 1950s cut their teeth on the 1952 Stevenson campaign: Stevenson was to them in part a politician who had actively opposed McCarthyism (a sore point in a state that had seen bitter anti-communist campaigns, notably in the Senate race between Richard Nixon and Helen Douglas) and in part a blank canvas onto which they could project their search for political meaning and belonging.

The Stevenson campaign in California sparked a network of ‘Stevenson for President’ clubs independent of the official party organization and which would form the foundations of the new California Democratic Council in 1953. The growing movement for Stevenson during the early-mid 1950s was part of a rethinking of liberal politics for an age of prosperity. It also represented an attempt to import a New Deal electoral politics to a state that had voted for

¹⁴ Stanley Crook to James Loeb, Director of the Americans for Democratic Action, 31 July 1950, ADA MSS microfilm, reel 57, section 5.

¹⁵ See Jonathan Bell, *California Crucible*, chapter 1.

¹⁶ Paul Seabury to Sam Beer of ADA, nd, ADA MSS, reel 57, section 5.

FDR but had never established his party as a dominant force. A summary of issues for the campaign by Los Angeles party operatives in October raised the question of Social Security as a New Deal triumph that could help bring Roosevelt's electoral magic to the west coast of the 1950s. The report noted that LA County had more residents over 65 years old than any other county in the country, and that what was termed a 'liberal view on old age and disability allotments [is] helpful for Southern California discussion.' In Richmond, a naval city in the East Bay near San Francisco, the major issues were 'reactivation of the shipyards, need for industrial water, Taft-Hartley, FEPC, Social Security, other progressive measures.'¹⁷ A significant addition to the roster of liberal concerns, one destined to reshape the American political world beyond recognition in future years, was the question of civil rights, a theme that came up repeatedly in dispatches to Stevenson party HQ. Segregation in public housing in the Bay Area and Los Angeles and the lack of a state Fair Employment Practices law were underlined as key issues, ones Stevenson was encouraged to highlight in campaign visits.¹⁸

The stars began to align in California for Democrats in 1952 when organized labor in the state signalled its frustration with the GOP political establishment and its growing willingness to risk the ire of Republican-controlled government by backing Democratic candidates. Smarting from a GOP gerrymander of the reapportionment of legislative seats in Sacramento that handed new districts to anti-labor right-wingers, William McSorley of the National Labor League for Political Education of the AFL told delegates at the August 1952 Santa Barbara convention of the California branch that 'this year of 1952 is indeed the most crucial year in the history of the American labor movement.' He bitterly attacked the Republican-Dixiecrat coalition in Congress 'that has served only one purpose: to delay, to disrupt and to destroy every single liberal, forward piece of legislation that has been brought up.' He urged union members to 'work politically to destroy reaction, to retire the peddlers of reaction from the halls of the United States Congress and the State Legislatures.'¹⁹ He was speaking to a receptive audience: member after member came to the floor of the pre-primary endorsement convention in San Francisco in April to express dissatisfaction with the California GOP and its links to labor, with one delegate lambasting his union's prior 'placation program: "If we

¹⁷ Summary of major issues, Los Angeles and Richmond, 10 October 1952, Stevenson MSS, Box 230, file 5.

¹⁸ Summary of major issues and background, San Francisco and Alameda Counties, 3 September 1952, Stevenson MSS, Box 230, file 5.

¹⁹ Address of William McSorley in Proceedings of the Pre-General Election Convention of the CLLPE, 27 August 1952, California LLPE-COPE MSS, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University, Box 7, folder 7, p.19ff.

just don't kick you hard, will you please be kind to us next year?"²⁰ It would take until the divisive right-to-work campaign of 1958 in California for labor fully to align itself with a rejuvenated Democratic Party, but the process of realignment and the increasing schism between labor-liberalism and the right set the terms for a politics of economic citizenship that was anything but consensual.

The alliance between organized labor and the emerging left-liberal activist cadre emerging in the newly-formed California Democratic Council in 1953 was in many ways wracked by suspicion and a product of happenstance as much as design. In 1957 George O'Brien of the AFL-CIO declared that 'a state of war' existed between activist clubs and labor over the leadership and direction of the Democratic Party, and the coalition of interests that came together to take the governorship and defeat right-to-work in 1958 would prove difficult to maintain over the longer term.²¹ But a 1955 analysis of California liberal politics underlined the importance of the political changes taking place: 'What has happened is not a mere growth or development of the [Democratic] Party but its complete rebirth. Although the NEW Democratic Party is still young, it has all the potentialities necessary to make it an integrated, coordinated, disciplined and more efficient party than it has been in a generation.' The new Democratic club structure established after the Stevenson campaign 'made Democrats FEEL like Democrats, just as the addition of party labels made them VOTE like Democrats.'²² By November 1954 some 425 Democratic clubs had been set up across all but six of 30 congressional districts. 'Only a forthright challenge of the Republican position all down the line will bring out the masses of voters who have "had enough," wrote Dewey Anderson to CDC Chair Alan Cranston in February 1954. The new organization had the task, he argued, of promoting 'the welfare of the broadest possible body of our citizens.'²³

Emboldened by their organizational successes, California Democrats were no longer satisfied seeing what they wanted to see in Adlai Stevenson: in 1956 they wanted him to embody liberal principles. Gerald O'Hara, and active Democrat in San Francisco, wrote the Stevenson campaign HQ in Chicago in April 1956 about his impressions of Stevenson's campaign style. Stevenson, he wrote, may 'in truth be the prophet of a new Democracy of "moderation and

²⁰ Jimmy Waugh speech to CLLPE pre-primary convention, 7 April 1952, CLLPE MSS, Box 7, folder 6, page 116.

²¹ Roger Kent to George O'Brien, 30 July 1957, Alan Cranston MSS, Bancroft Library, Box 10, Democratic Party Central Committee file.

²² Miriam Deinard Coffey and Rudolph Pacht, 'The New California Democratic Party: The Place of the California Democratic Council in the Democratic Party of California,' Cranston MSS, Box 11, CDC History material file. In 1952 party labels had been placed next to candidates' names on the ballot in California for the first time.

²³ Dewey Anderson to Cranston, 4 February 1954, Cranston MSS, Box 10, Dewey Anderson file.

conciliation” but if he is the voters don’t understand it and won’t buy it. If he is not the apostle of the Democracy that crusades for labor (by which I mean all work for wages), for the small farmer, for the old, the sick, and the jobless, for children, for Negroes, for peace, for the small businessman, for a better life for all Americans (especially the little fellow) without a ceiling...and a vigorous, unremitting fighter for the better life – then he is nothing as a Democratic candidate in 1956.’²⁴ The response in San Francisco to a questionnaire sent out to local Democratic campaign outfits asking for the issues at stake to those working on the campaign trail was equally strident: ‘Governor Stevenson should tour our Howard Street flophouses and point up the human misery – still very real, if not as vivid as it has been...He should visit our Hunter’s Point “temporary” housing where negroes live because they can’t get good private housing at rates they can pay. He should dramatize his interest in these problems.’ In addition to highlighting poverty and the dangers of another economic downturn, especially in agriculture, the report urged the campaign to demonstrate how Stevenson could ‘consolidate and *advance* the Democratic gains in social and old age security, health preservation (district hospitals etc), health insurance (this need not touch the doctor-patient relationship but can cover all the costly incidentals of catastrophic illness such as hospital, laboratory, drugs, nurses, technical therapies), farm security, housing, SEC.’²⁵ One Stevenson advisor called this emphasis on renewing and advancing the New Deal order ‘a start...toward developing a theme for the Age of Abundance...I would cite health-education-welfare high on the list, with particular emphasis on the old folks.’²⁶ In California, at least, the notion that the Democrats had ‘run out of poor people’ or that a politics of abundance was somehow incompatible with redistributive politics did not seem to resonate.

On the contrary, a California PR company report for Stevenson painted a sort of Valley of the Dolls picture of psychiatrist couches, economic and consumer debt pressures, and the woes of working families: ‘One of the manifestations of the pressure on living standards here is a widespread pattern of two jobs per man in the hope of meeting mortgages and payments. A psychiatrist told us that his patients here show far more than the usual anxiety about earning enough to keep up in the rat race....What this all adds up to is a kind of New Deal package...The bread-and-butter package should appeal to the rapidly growing middle-class

²⁴ Gerald O’Hara to Ken Hechler, 26 April 1956, Stevenson MSS, Box 248, folder 7.

²⁵ Reply to ‘Outline for local material’ questionnaire, San Francisco, Stevenson MSS, Box 248, folder 7.

²⁶ Harry Ashmore to Stevenson, 4 May 1956, Stevenson MSS, Box 248, folder 7.

suburbs and might include such items and schools, water, taxes, and consumer debt.²⁷ The added issue in California by 1956 was activist passion over civil rights and desperate concern to get Stevenson energised on the issue. A bread-and-butter package of middle class welfare and civil rights carried the seeds of a deeper debate yet to fully take flower of how to redefine the New Deal to take in the changing dynamics of social inclusion.

At the same time, anti-labor business interests in California were mounting their own challenge to those in the Republican Party committed to former Governor Earl Warren and his allies' accommodation with labor and elements of the New Deal. A powerful group of conservative power brokers, including the Chandler family, owners of the *LA Times*, and Joe Knowland of the *Oakland Tribune*, forced Governor Goodwin Knight into swapping jobs for the 1958 campaign: Knight would run for William Knowland's Senate seat and Knowland would run for the Governorship. One commentator noted that 'California is becoming the most important state in the Union, and the conservative element is not willing to let it be a liberal state. They couldn't trust Knight to be conservative. Knight has been all things to all men.' Another journalist emphasized the wider import of the switch: Knowland had built his case for taking over the Governorship on his endorsement of a business-backed right-to-work referendum that would decimate labor's capacity to secure membership through a union shop. Knowland's 'gamble on the right-to-work law paid off in consolidating the kingmaker group behind him.'²⁸ One businessman commented that Knight's 'complete leftist attitude in endorsing and supporting labor...has also severely damaged the Governor. The Governor's repeated statement that he would veto any "Right-to-Work" legislation is another factor that has lost him Republican support throughout the state.'²⁹ The Knowland challenge for the Governorship represented the culmination of a process of business disenchantment with the enduring legacy of New Deal labor policy in California. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 had given states the right to repeal union shop provisions in favour of an open shop in which there was no obligation for employees to join a union at all. Yet by 1957 of the most industrialized states in the US only Indiana had passed an open shop law, and many in California and elsewhere feared that open shop states in the emerging Sunbelt region of the south and

²⁷ Research report by Edward L. Greenfield and Co, 'The Stevenson Campaign in California,' Stevenson MSS, Box 299, folder 5.

²⁸ Memo, Will Davidson to Whitaker and Baxter PR company, 20 November 1957, re KQED program 'Governor Knight – Did he jump or was he pushed?' Whitaker and Baxter MSS, California State Archives, Box 50, Operation switchover file.

²⁹ L. R. Hart of Sebastopol Fruit Growers Association to T R Dwyer, 16 September 1957, Knowland MSS, Bancroft Library, Box 105, Political campaign, October 1957 file.

southwest could lure business away.³⁰ By 1958, therefore, a major political schism was opening up between anti-labor conservatives and labor liberals in California and certain other industrialized states such as Ohio that would test the definitional limits of the word ‘consensus’ in a major way. As labor leader Walter Reuther himself put it in July 1958, the American labor movement was trying ‘to bring about a basic realignment so that the two parties really stand for distinct points of view. And I think this is happening very rapidly. More and more the Democratic Party is coming to reflect the kind of programs and policies that the American labor movement can support, while the Republican Party more and more becomes the party of business.’³¹ Just as importantly, the manner in which the debate over labor was constructed and played out demonstrated ideological fissures in American politics that transcended the immediate questions being debated and set the terms of political divisions that would outlive any so-called ‘Age of Consensus.’

The 1958 Campaign and the battle over citizenship

It was clear nationally that the stuttering economy would make the 1958 midterms challenging for Eisenhower and the Republican Party. Despite the President’s robust participation in the campaign, including in California, he could not see off a landslide defeat for his party.³² Yet the elections for Governor and Senator in the Golden State signalled a more profound political shift than just one of party control. Ideology assumed a far greater role in the dynamics of party politics there than ever before. In California the elections demonstrated unequivocally that the period between the passage of Taft-Hartley and the 1960s represented the inherent inability of business elites, labor, and Democratic liberals to agree on the internal dynamics of welfare capitalism. By the late 1950s this meant more than a disagreement about the scope of New Deal industrial pluralism that masked a wider general agreement about the robustness and promise of American capitalism. There was a genuine and substantive difference between labor liberalism and right-to-work conservatism that was on one level a simple debate about ‘who runs America,’ the anti-labor slogan given rhetorical power by Congressional investigations in the late 1950s into union corruption and links to

³⁰ Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, ‘Counter-organizing the Sunbelt,’; Melvin Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

³¹ Henry Brandon, ‘A conversation with Walter Reuther: How do we live with bigness?’ *New Republic*, 21 July 1958, 13-18.

³² The Democrats won a 64-34 margin in the Senate and a 282-154 margin in the House. See Iwan Morgan, *Eisenhower versus the Spenders: The Eisenhower Administration, the Democrats and the Budget, 1953-60* (London: Pinter, 1990): 123-126.

organized crime, but on another level it was a more coded and contested debate over who came within the protective umbrella of state power and why.

Fundamental to the battle over right-to-work in California was a contest over how citizenship should be defined and categorized. On one side, General Electric Public Relations Manager R W Jackson appealed to a notion of ‘corporate citizenship’ whereby leaders of industry by virtue of their proven ability to manage the economy had a duty to take a political stand on questions of economic power. ‘GE takes no sides in the campaigns of individuals for political office. But where vital public issues are involved, affecting the economic welfare of a community and its people, we believe it an essential part of good corporate citizenship to make whatever views we may have known.’³³ GE was one of a formidable phalanx of corporate behemoths to come out strongly in favour of California’s ballot proposition 18 to ban the union shop, portraying themselves not simply as guardians of good citizenship against the totalitarian impulses of ‘labor bosses’ but even as embodiments of citizenship, a strategy that recalled the *Connecticut Life Insurance Co. v Johnson* Supreme Court case of 1938. The case was notable for recently-appointed Justice Hugo Black’s dissent, in which he questioned the conflation of ‘person’ and corporation in the majority’s reading of the due process clause in the fourteenth amendment.³⁴ In the Knowland gubernatorial campaign of 1958, a campaign totally dominated by the drive to pass the right-to-work referendum, citizenship was defined in universalist terms, eliding racial, class, or gendered distinctions in favor of a portrayal of a population united by a common understanding of freedom and anti-statism. Knowland decried his Democratic opponent’s ‘special promises to special groups. By his promises to the racial minorities of this state he has set them apart as a special interest group seeking special legislation. Minorities should not be segregated but should have their rights protected as citizens of this great country.’³⁵ Similarly, Knowland’s anti-union shop stance was described as stemming from his revulsion at apparent union corruption, and that he wanted to give ‘every worker in California freedom to decide for himself whether to join a union.’³⁶ His opponent was ‘the captive candidate of the political labor bosses who have accumulated a one and a half million dollar slush fund from their members in an all-out attempt to seize power in California....This is the road away from free enterprise and toward

³³ R W Jackson form letter, 22 September 1958, David Selvin MSS, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University, Box 27, file 11.

³⁴ *Connecticut General Life Insurance Co. v. Johnson*, 303 US 77 (1938).

³⁵ Knowland statement on civil rights, nd, Knowland MSS, Box 101, civil rights file.

³⁶ Knowland speech at Kiwanis Club, 2 September 1958, Knowland MSS, Box 102, Kiwanis Club speech file.

state labor socialist controls.’³⁷ The Republican campaign aligned good citizenship with an undifferentiated individualism given structure by corporate leadership.

The Labor Committee against Prop 18, by contrast, deliberately targeted its media campaign at individual people, taking care to differentiate people’s lives and make the argument against right-to-work personal to them. Labor radio spots were scripted to appeal to a variety of demographic groups, including housewives, merchants, workers, and businessmen. The campaign built gendered tropes of male workers and female household managers into a carefully crafted political portrait of a society bound together by higher living standards thanks to collective bargaining rights. The campaign against right-to-work concerned a housewife’s ‘family and home – her household budget and living standards. A NO vote will protect California’s high wages and salaries – keep them going up, ahead of rising living costs.’³⁸ A mailshot put together by the San Francisco Local of the Waitresses Union contrasted working Americans in right-to-work states, who ‘work long hours, six days per week, and for practically no wages at all’ with waitresses in California enjoying ‘the wage of \$5.55 for just a three-hour lunch shift, plus meals, uniforms and all other fringe benefits.’³⁹ A Bay Area TV ad scheduled for Labor Day entitled ‘Every Other House’ sought in a similar way to personalize the collective bargaining issue as a battle between ordinary wage earners and big capital. The advert consisted of ‘a series of reports and dramatic vignettes by residents (TV performers) of an imaginary block in a typical Bay Area community,’ and the narrator began his story with the assertion that ‘labor unions are people – people working together to accomplish desirable goals,’ before meeting these ‘residents’ and creating a picture of individual union members as component parts of a wider community.⁴⁰ A precinct worker’s handbook for anti-Prop 18 workers emphasized that ‘TALK is your most potent weapon in precinct work – plain talk, neighbor-to-neighbor talk. And it’s used most effectively in personal visits to the voters at their homes.’⁴¹ This attempt to carry a personal appeal to voters was a deliberate attempt to counter ant pro-right-to-work campaign’s portrayal of unions as criminal outfits divorced from the concerns of working people. The tone and essential message of labor’s campaign was specific to the context of the 1950s:

³⁷ Knowland speech to Republican Assembly, Stockton, CA, 4 October 1958, Knowland MSS, Box 102, Stockton speech file.

³⁸ Labor Committee against Prop 18 radio spot script, Selvin MSS, Box 27, folder 10.

³⁹ Waitresses Union Local 48 mailshot on right-to-work, Knowland MSS, Box 115, Prop 18 file.

⁴⁰ Dave Selvin memo to George Johnson re labor day TV ad, Selvin MSS, Box 27, folder 11; Script of TV ad, broadcast 31 August and 1 September 1958, KQED San Francisco, Selvin MSS, Box 27, folder 10.

⁴¹ Precinct worker handbook, Selvin MSS, Box 28, folder 2.

labor had collective bargaining rights, and the threat of them being taken away, a danger offered by the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, promised the collapse of the quality of life for which the Golden State had become known.

Though careful to sidestep too much involvement in the labor question, Democratic gubernatorial candidate Pat Brown widened the anti-right-to-work campaign's appeal to the needs and aspirations of individual citizens through the invocation of the protective powers of the state. In a speech entitled 'Government with a Heart' he argued that 'public welfare involves the State's obligations to the aged – to needy children – to babies without homes – to the alcoholic – to wayward youth – to the mentally and physically ill – to crippled children and adults....It is common sense to assist the needy of the state on two bases: Humanitarian considerations, and the ability of the State to pay the bills.' In contrast to his own articulation of categories of citizens 'who need our outstretched hand,' and of a government 'which respects the dignity of every last citizen in our State, including and down to the humblest and the poorest,' the Knowland campaign portrayed 'the average citizen as a faceless man' in a desperate attempt to deny the need for state regulation of economic relationships and social policy.⁴² The political worldview portrayed here represented a deliberate strategy of associating redistributive liberalism with modernity: this was not now a Depression-era call for help to relieve general economic distress but rather a statement of society's moral obligation to ensure a wealthy and prosperous nation provided for all its citizens. Brown, like the anti-right-to-work campaign, also spelled out how society was not simply an undifferentiated mass of individuals but a kaleidoscope of different social groups with differing social and economic needs. The speech – and the Democratic campaign more generally – were replete with cultural assumptions about poverty and exclusion that pathologised the so-called 'needy' and used standard paternalist tropes. And in a sense the 1958 campaign represented the playing out of battles over how best to reconcile labor and management that had defined American domestic politics since the New Deal. Yet California had missed out on the political realignments of the 1930s, and the Democratic bid for power in the late 1950s was taking place at a time when social protections of the New Deal already existed, making the concerted effort by the right to repeal them a much more deeply fought

⁴² Brown speech 'Government with a Heart,' Brown MSS, Box 46, Government with a Heart file.

struggle than a ‘consensus’ reading of the politics of the era allows, whatever terms of reference we use.⁴³

Following the Democratic Party’s landslide election victory both in California and across the nation in 1958, including the defeat of ballot initiatives to roll back union rights in both California and Ohio, the *New Republic* provided its readership with a shopping list of legislative tasks for the now overwhelmingly Democratic Congress in Washington. The picture painted of the state of the nation at the end of the 1950s demonstrated clearly how liberals were having to redefine New Deal politics for an age of plenty whilst also continue to justify the existence of a social safety net. ‘The Democratic Party identifies itself as the party of the people,’ the article began. ‘It therefore behoves the Democratic majority to be *contemporary in its assumptions about who the people are*. Descriptions of the people which were accurate the last time the Democrats had a majority of present proportions are meaningless today, and the importance of working from modern descriptions cannot be overemphasized.’ This emphasis on modernity sprang from the argument that ‘lower or upper middle-class families are interested in facilities. Since many of them now have the staple consumer goods, they are more and more aware of the deficit in *community* goods – schools, roads, public services of all sorts.’⁴⁴ As in the case of organized labor’s reliance on general rising living standards as the justification for the union shop, fifties liberals attempted to universalize the relationship between the individual and the state: no longer was the New Deal a response to the Depression or a safety net for the poor; it was a set of policies and goals to help all citizens navigate the economic travails of everyday life and get access to basic social commodities like education, public power and water, and transport infrastructure. The New Deal of the 1930s had itself possessed universalist policies, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, but now the message of liberal intellectuals and elected politicians was that a common conception of economic citizenship backed by state authority was the central plank of their political project.

Two factors made this a deeply contested political worldview. The first, as we have seen, was that business conservatives and their allies were more concerned than ever to redefine citizenship as a private matter not subject to the guiding hand of the state, especially when it came to the economic relationship between labor and capital. The second was that in order to

⁴³ Iwan Morgan, *Eisenhower Versus the Spenders: The Eisenhower Administration, the Democrats and the Budget, 1953-60* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1990): 123-125.

⁴⁴ ‘Work ahead for Congress,’ *New Republic*, 17 November 1958, 7ff. Emphasis original.

personalize their message about universal rights to access to capital and services by means of the harnessing of governmental power, liberals increasingly had to define who needed the help of the state. In so doing, they had to assert that citizens, including those Brown defined as ‘wayward’ and those the *New Republic* termed ‘contemporary,’ required access to publicly-provided goods. In the words of one aide to Governor Brown in 1960, the administration should recognize ‘our rights as consumers to employ our government to arrange to scrutinize in our behalf products and services which the prudent consumer cannot feel confident of evaluating himself and to provide needed services that cannot be provided privately.’⁴⁵ The provision of social services and of protective legislation such as a fair employment practices law gave government the opportunity to act as arbiter of social behavior, something that long predated the 1950s but was given new impetus in late fifties California by the fact that the liberal victory was seen as new and requiring a fresh set of priorities.

Categories of the needy established earlier in the twentieth century, such as needy children and the elderly, acted in the early Brown administration as policy proving grounds for a political engagement with social diversity. The state’s needy children program, for example, was identified as a mechanism which, with amendment and improvement, could deal with ‘the entire scope of circumstances and events which subject children to conditions and situations which are inimical to their physical and moral welfare with particular attention being given to preventive activities and to the restoration and strengthening of family integrity and independence.’⁴⁶ The key policy innovation to achieve this goal was the elimination in 1963 of the requirement that a parent be absent from the home for the child to qualify for benefits, a limited but genuine erosion of the New Deal link between traditional family structure (only widows and the abandoned needed government assistance) and social citizenship.⁴⁷ Tellingly, a state government welfare adviser noted in 1960 that the state Department of Social Welfare had until then ‘been limited also by traditional notions concerning welfare which our more liberal legislature and Administration have discarded, thereby freeing the Department to plan in a positive way for the overall welfare of the needy and dependent.’ This new political climate allowed for a more universalist approach to the

⁴⁵ Memo from Helen Nelson to Alexander Pope, Governor’s Office, Brown MSS, Box 73, consumers file.

⁴⁶ J M Wedemeyer, Director of Department of Social Welfare, to Pat Brown, 30 August 1960, Brown MSS, Box 73, social welfare file.

⁴⁷ For an extended treatment of this theme see Jonathan Bell, ‘Social Democracy and the Rise of the Democratic Party in California, 1950-1964,’ *Historical Journal*, 49:2 (2006), 497-524.

maintenance of social welfare of the citizenry. ‘Today there is a new climate at all levels – legislative, departmental, and executive. The time is opportune for a comprehensive statement embodying an inclusive program and philosophy.’ The report focused on the elderly, long an acknowledged category of the deserving, but argued that ‘old age is the great leveller,’ and so an approach that privileged only the needy poor was no longer appropriate in a modern society that associated modernity with prosperity and health. ‘The health problem of the aged’ was in part ‘an economic problem produced by a coincidence of declining earning power and growing need for increasingly costly drugs, hospitals and physicians,’ as well as a ‘medical problem of learning and employing rehabilitative techniques instead of treating the aged as though they were incurable invalids.’ The report argued that only a policy of state-provided health care for all elderly persons would allow older Americans the quality of life that all citizens deserved in the modern age.⁴⁸ Policy formation in the early Brown years acted as a laboratory for the reframing of social assumptions of citizenship well before the explosion of ‘rights talk’ with the civil rights revolutions of the later 1960s.⁴⁹

In this reading, welfare liberalism engaged increasingly with questions of social difference in California of the late 1950s, as politicians, policy advocates, and labor unions attempted to create a message of the state as benevolent overseer of economic justice in order to contest corporate control over economic citizenship. This process was inevitably patchy and full of contradictions. The growth of a complex social welfare bureaucracy by the early 1960s placed social policy at the heart of the administration, but encouraged the greater policing of the needy poor in ways that sat uncomfortably with the state government’s stated acceptance of the reality of social diversity. The administration passed a civil rights bill to prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods and services in 1959, together with a Fair Employment Practices Act, but remained stubbornly unwilling to tackle the patent economic and racial injustice inherent in the bracero program of Latino migrant labor. But the 1950s witnessed a serious debate in California liberal discourse, electoral politics, and policy formation over the boundaries of economic and social citizenship that took place exactly at the moment Republican politics was drifting rapidly rightwards towards an association of good citizenship with free labor markets and corporate control over political debate. The explosion of civil rights and the launching of Johnson’s Great Society in 1964 would place this political chasm front and center in national political debate and draw a line under

⁴⁸ Memo from Harry Girvetz to Alexander Pope, Governor’s Office, 20 April 1960, Brown MSS, Box 71, social welfare – general file.

⁴⁹ See Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

Hodgson's era of consensus. But the roots of a bitter conflict between a 'corporate citizenship' that effectively dismissed social difference as a factor in organising or regulating society and a welfare liberalism that viewed the individual through the lens of state-supported rights are clearly located in the post-Taft-Hartley period.⁵⁰

In the final analysis any notion of consensus in politics can only be perceived from a particular and limited vantage point. It is true that the language of liberalism in most electoral contests or policy formulations of the 1950s was confined within capitalist and anti-communist boundaries that showed the bitter class conflicts of the 1930s to be a distant memory. Yet that decade witnessed in California the emergence of subaltern movements for legal and social rights unimaginable before World War Two, including the nascent homophile movement and an increasingly confident array of civil rights movements.⁵¹ Nor was the labor movement an impotent force buffeted by the uncontested march of corporate capitalism. The convoluted story of liberal Democratic politics in the Golden State of the 1950s is one of the elastic ideological possibilities of liberal politics, which set up the terms of the hotly contested battles over social inclusion and individual rights that took off in earnest in the wake of the sixties.

⁵⁰ Hodgson himself referred to the political upheavals sparked by the Vietnam War and civil rights movement as the 'great schism' that marked the watershed terminating his era of consensus politics: see Hodgson, *In Our Time*, chapters 13 and 14. Yet it is genuinely hard to view Californian politics of the 1950s, in particular the election of 1958, as a case of 'the powerful emotions and interests that always work for conservative policies...opposed by a liberalism that was in effect hardly to be distinguished from a more sophisticated and less resolute conservatism.' (Hodgson, 98).

⁵¹ See John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Mark Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California, 1941-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).