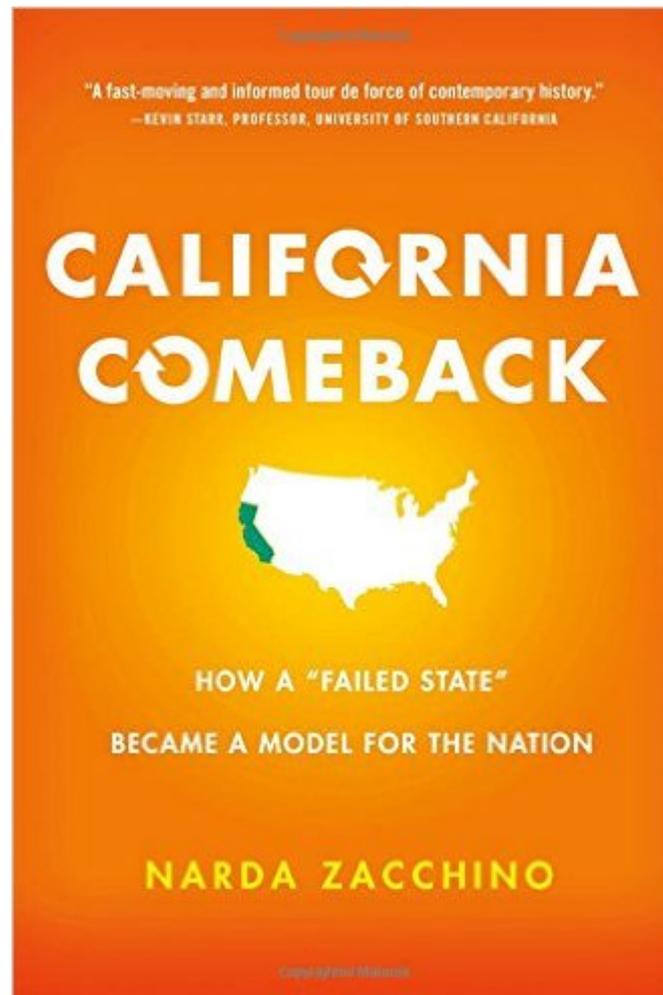


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# California Comeback: How A "Failed State" Became A Model For The Nation



## Synopsis

An in-depth look at California's remarkable 21st century turnaround, focusing on the role played by the state government under Jerry Brown. In the most economically important state in the country and the 7th largest economy in the world a political revolution of historic importance has occurred which has not been sufficiently covered by the media. In the state where the Reagan Revolution was born, there has recently occurred a remarkable progressive revolution under the leadership of another governor, four-term Democrat Jerry Brown. Over the past several decades, as it has evolved from a red state to solid blue, California has boldly reinvigorated the notion that government is not a dirty word but rather an instrument for uniting people and improving their lives. From raising taxes on those with annual incomes over \$250,000, to shifting money toward the schools in low-income communities, from seeking environmental alliances with other countries to limit climate change, to the rejection of militaristic solutions to illegal immigration, California has been a laboratory of innovation. Californians have rejected the "race to the bottom" right-wing philosophy that catapulted conservative politics in recent years. That model of endorsing privatization, deregulation, reductions in government spending, and a tax system that disproportionately favors the wealthy, is exemplified by conservative governors and rejected by the pragmatic liberal Jerry Brown. In *California Comeback*, award-winning journalist Narda Zacchino, who has covered California politics for over three decades, clearly lays out the history of California's initial experiments with progressivism under Brown, its swing to the right under Reagan, near financial collapse under Schwarzenegger, and recent return to stability bulwarked but the progressive policies made possible by the second coming of Jerry Brown. This progressive mindset, forged in the crucible of the tumultuous last half century, is California's true contribution not only to the country, but to the world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

California Comeback begins with the author's description of how her mother and father, both Marine Corps veterans, settled in California after the Second World War buying a small home in a suburb of San Diego. By 1978, her mother, still in the same house and living on Social Security and veteran's benefits felt as if she might be forced to sell because of skyrocketing property taxes. She was one of many Californians in the same situation. Half-hearted efforts to fix the problem had failed leaving rapidly increasing home values automatically increasing property taxes. In California such a situation opens the door to a ballot initiative by which citizens (and organizations such as unions and corporations) have the ability to propose laws and constitutional amendments without support from the legislature. By their very nature such initiatives also carry risks of causing as many problems as they solve. In 1978 Proposition 13 proposed to solve the problem of rapidly escalating property taxes with a constitutional amendment. It promised, among other things, to cut property taxes by more than 50% and tie all future tax bills to 1% of the 1975 assessed value. On Election Day, to the surprise of no one, California voters approved it and in doing so fundamentally changed how property in California is taxed plunging many functions of state government, including the entire education system into chaos. The new tax policies tied state finances in knots and, according to California historian Kevin Starr, established "an unfair and dysfunctional two-tiered system of property taxes [that] brought California to the edge." • The central narrative in California Comeback traces both how close the state came to economic collapse and how the extraordinary recovery was managed.

This would be, and may still be, a controversial book, but less so due to the evidence itself. The right wing economics in play since the fall of communism was a key factor in running California into economic ruin. The pattern that had doomed California included endorsing privatization, deregulation, reductions in government spending, eschewing subsidies, minimal government interference in business, and a tax system that favored the wealthy. All of those factors brought California down. And it was the reversal and/or fine-tuning of these factors that brought California back from the brink. This book outlines very clearly how California got into a very complex mess. The

theories and philosophies that drove it there. The main corporate players like Enron who helped create bad economics there, and the political players who doomed the state because of faulty ideas and values. The book just as clearly spells out the changes that occurred when Jerry Brown came in and started to turn the state around. The story of how California went down, and how it came back, is very complex and the author does a good job bringing in those salient events and policies helping you understand the situation in clear detail. The scope here is wide from energy and environmental issues, undocumented workers, mandatory jail sentences, and university funding. This book will be challenging for those who are ingrained to believe the policies that brought California to a failed state are the best ones. We should hope that other states are paying attention and follow the California lead.

With a nod to truth in advertising, *California Comeback* is marketed as a *lefty* examination of California's evolving political landscape since the events leading to the passage of Proposition 13 in the 1970s. Liberal journalist and former editor of the *Los Angeles Times* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Narda Zacchino writes sentimentally about her home state. Despite its growing pains, she argues that California has become a model for the nation (page 15). It's advanced as a common-sense alternative to the self-defeating paradigm held by Tea Party-style conservatives who object to taxes and government regulation (interference). The book is conveniently structured, essentially beginning with Proposition 13 (the people's fight against outlandish property taxes) and ending with Proposition 30 (the people's support for a higher sales tax and income tax of the wealthy). The suggestion might be that Californians have come full circle in their view of taxation. Of course this would be an over-simplification. The outlandish property taxes were crushing the poor and middle class so something had to be done and the new taxes expire after a set timeframe. Perhaps the real message is one of moderation. Naturally, Governor Jerry Brown features quite prominently in the book (the author clearly holds him in high regard but she's no sycophant) and his pragmatism (neatly summed up in the expression *“paddle left, paddle right”*) might be the clearest and most reasonable message found in the book. Deregulation, immigration (Proposition 187), environmentalism, and the penal system are also all treated at length. The contrasting conservative philosophy is examined primarily through examples from Texas with (dis)honorable mention for Kansas.

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