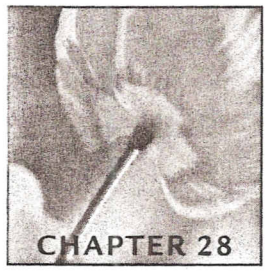

Politics California Style

The middle decades of the twentieth century were a crucial period in the political history of California. Both major parties remained extraordinarily weak, and new institutions emerged to fill the void. In the free-for-all of California politics, spurious issues and a galaxy of political exotics created an impression of political fervor. Pundits marveled at the anomalous spectacle of the state's Democratic majority consistently electing Republicans to office. The tide turned in 1958 when the Democrats at last managed to gain control of the state government.

Meanwhile, California's political leaders were capturing the national limelight. The state was on its way to becoming a training ground for national leadership.

Nonpartisanship Favors the Republicans

The rolls of registered voters show that the great depression of the 1930s had converted California from an overwhelmingly Republican to a heavily Democratic state. In 1930 the number of Californians registered as Democrats had been only 22 percent of the two-party registration. In 1936 it had risen to 60 percent, and this three-to-two superiority of Democratic over Republican voters continued with little variation for decades afterward. Yet from 1942 until 1958, the preponderantly Democratic voters of California elected heavy majorities of Republicans to state offices.

More than ever before, the political conditions of the depressed 1930s had identified the Republicans as the party of the haves and the Democrats as the party of the have-nots. A large majority of the business community continued to be Republican. So did a substantial proportion of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. The Democrats, on the other hand, drew the bulk of their following from labor, the unemployed, and ethnic and religious minority groups. Most of the huge increase in Democratic registration in the early 1930s was made up of citizens who had never taken the

trouble to register before and who did so now out of a desire to vote for a government that would take a greater interest in the less advantaged members of society.

All this meant, however, that most Democratic voters were less educated and less informed than most Republican voters. In this situation California's peculiar cross-filing law tended to keep Republican incumbents in office. Under that law the party affiliations of candidates did not appear on the primary election ballot, but a candidate running for reelection was listed first and identified as the incumbent. Hundreds of thousands of Democratic voters were quite unaware that the incumbent whose name appeared on the Democratic primary ballot could be and in fact usually was a Republican. Under this system, three-fourths of the elections to state offices were won in the primaries by incumbents who won the nominations of both major parties. In the legislative session of 1945, for example, 36 of the 40 state senators were elected in the primaries, and most of them were Republican incumbents.

In other respects, also, the Republicans were in a much better position than the Democrats to cope with the "nonpartisan" system (or rather the antiparty system), which the Republican progressives under Hiram Johnson had introduced. The Republicans not only had most of the experienced and successful candidates; they also had far more money for political campaigning, and they had the support of a great majority of the newspapers, including the three most influential ones, the *Los Angeles Times,* the *San Francisco Chronicle,* and the *Oakland Tribune.*

A newspaper is ordinarily a business enterprise, dependent for the bulk of its income on the advertising of other business enterprises. Consequently, most newspaper publishers preferred the Republican party, with its orientation toward business interests, low taxes, and a minimum of governmental control. Remembering the preponderance of Democratic voters, however, California newspapers tended to support Republican candidates as individuals without overstressing their party affiliation.

Filling the Void

Cross-filing and the other antiparty laws of the progressives had been designed to destroy the power of corrupt political machines in California. By weakening the traditional party organizations, these laws opened the way for alternative institutions to fill the power vacuum. These institutions included special-interest lobbyists, professional campaign-management firms, and informal party organizations.

Lobbying has often been known as "the fourth branch of government" or as "the third house" of a legislature. In fact, the lawmaking process in any democratic government would be crippled if the legislative body tried to operate without the constant flow of information from representatives of interested groups. But the corrupt use of power, and especially the power of money to influence legislation and the elections of legislators, has always been a menace to democracy.

Arthur H. Samish, king of the California lobbyists, represented a coalition of liquor, oil, bus, trucking, mining, banking, billboard, theatrical, racetrack, and other interests. He came to have almost as much power in the 1930s and 1940s as William F. Herrin had exercised at the turn of the century. Samish organized the state's brewers,