

liberalism . . . , in the giant footsteps of such memorable governors as Hughes and Roosevelt in New York, Wilson in New Jersey, La Follette in Wisconsin, Altgeld and Stevenson in Illinois, and Johnson and Warren in California.”

Brown proposed a number of liberal measures, and the legislature enacted most of them. He recommended a law against racial discrimination by employers and labor unions, and the legislature responded with a fair employment practices act. Maximum payments for unemployment insurance, disability, and workers’ compensation were substantially increased. For the protection of consumers, a state office of consumers’ counsel was created, with authority to act against false or misleading practices in labeling and packaging. A state economic development agency was established to attract new industries and aid long-range planning. Tax increases were adopted to meet a deficit left over from the previous year and to enable the state government to keep up with the swift growth of the state’s population by expanding its programs of highways, aid to local school districts, and crime control. At the governor’s urging, the legislature authorized studies that led to a master plan for higher education and to plans for the reorganization of many state offices under centralized departments. Cross-filing in elections was abolished.

Probably Brown’s greatest single achievement as governor was the adoption of a huge bond issue that enabled the state to proceed with its master plan for water development.

Most of California’s water was in the northern half of the state, whereas most of the need for water was in the southern half. The Los Angeles basin, for example, had only 0.06 percent of California’s natural stream flow of water. Under Governor Earl Warren, the legislature had authorized studies for a statewide water program that would ultimately be much larger than the federal Central Valley Project, but organized labor, conservative bankers, and majority opinion in northern California were strongly opposed to the state plan. Labor leaders argued that because the state program would not come under the federal limitation of 160 acres on the size of farms eligible to receive publicly subsidized water, the plan would result in the “unjust enrichment” of huge landowning corporations that were already too rich and too powerful. Major beneficiaries, labor pointed out, would include the Southern Pacific, Standard Oil, the Kern County Land Company, the Los Angeles Times Corporation, and other groups that held vast tracts in the southwestern San Joaquin Valley.

But Governor Brown believed that the water plan was indispensable for California’s future growth, and he threw all his political weight behind it. In 1959, at his insistence, the legislature authorized the submission to the voters of a bond issue of \$1.75 billion. This was the largest issue of bonds ever adopted by any state for any purpose. Most of the money would be used for the Feather River Project, at the heart of which was Oroville Dam, the tallest in the United States, to ensure a controlled flow of water to the San Joaquin Delta. From the delta, Brown said, “we are going to build a river 500 miles long” in order “to correct an accident of people and geography.” His proposed California Aqueduct would then deliver a constant flow of delta water to southern California. The voters of California, convinced by the governor’s enthusiastic campaigning, approved “Brown’s water bonds” in November 1960.

Edmund G. Brown would be remembered long afterward not only as a great builder but also as a consummate liberal Democrat. "Brown's final legacy was his generous and highly positive view of governmental power," concluded historian Martin Schiesl of California State University, Los Angeles. "He rightly believed that state government, under the direction of humane and imaginative leadership, could ease some of the distressing aspects of modern society, provide all Californians with a measure of dignity and assure for them a decent and durable standard of living."

Extremists, Right and Left

One of the key factors in California politics in the 1960s was the emergence of vividly colorful but startlingly eccentric new varieties of fanaticism at both ends of the political spectrum. On the far right, the John Birch Society became a ludicrous parody of the conservatism of the Republicans, and thus contributed substantially to their defeats in the state election of 1962 and the national election of 1964. At the other extreme, an anarchistic student wing of the New Left parodied the liberalism of the Democrats and contributed to the defeat of Governor Brown in the election of 1966.

The tendency to polarization in philosophical and political opinions has always characterized the discussion of human affairs. Medieval philosophers asserted that every human being was born either a Platonist or an Aristotelian. Environment is a more probable explanation than heredity, though Gilbert and Sullivan, in the context of English party politics in the nineteenth century, maintained that

Every boy and every gal
That's born into the world alive
Is either a little Liberal
Or else a little Conservative.

In twentieth-century American politics, especially after the 1930s, *liberalism* was the belief that government should take positive actions in the interests of the greater welfare and greater liberties of the whole people and that it should also take negative, regulatory actions to protect the public from abuses of freedom by private business. Other Americans, during the same period, regarded *conservatism* as an alternative and superior theory of progress. Conservatives argued not merely for the need to conserve what was good in the past, but also for the related belief that the best way to ensure the continued progress and improvement of American society was to leave the fullest possible freedom to the operations of private enterprise. The mainstream of American politics was a constant process of compromise between these two philosophies. But to the extremists of both the radical right and the radical left, compromise was unendurable.

The John Birch Society was founded in 1958 by Robert Welch, a retired candy manufacturer. Welch and many of his followers believed that the graduated income tax, social security, the United Nations, and racial integration in the public schools were communist plots; that the fluoridation of water was a communist conspiracy to weaken the American people by slow poison; and that President Harry S. Truman,