

YEAR OF FEAR;
WORRIES ABOUT CRIME, ECONOMY, IMMIGRANTS DOMINATE
POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN 1994 PRIMARY

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Body

As California voters head to the polls for Tuesday's **primary**, they should be facing an election for the ages.

Never have so many run for so much. Term limits and a fierce campaign for governor have led to the most competitive **political years** in memory.

The campaigns of 1992 offered legitimacy to new ways of taking campaigns to voters: cyberspace, MTV, talk radio and television. The issues facing the state are riveting. A stubborn recession. A smaller defense industry that is throwing thousands out of work. Schools that not only fail to educate children but also occasionally fail to keep them safe.

Despite its potential, this **primary** season has been anything but inspiring. Instead of rushing to the polls carrying hopes of a bright new day, voters will likely carry the message candidates have been sending them for months: Be afraid. Be very afraid.

Think of **1994** as the **Year of Fear**. Listen to the campaign themes:

* **Crime**. The bad guys are out there. They are preparing to beat you, rob you, harm your children and maybe even kill you.

* Immigration. People who don't belong here are pouring over the border. They will take your jobs, use the resources intended for your children's education and take advantage of social services you've been paying for for **years**.

* The **economy**. Sure, it's getting better in other parts of the country, but not here.

It is a long way from 1992, when Ross Perot stirred a sizable part of the electorate with the promise of a new way to run the country and Bill Clinton and Al Gore won the White House by urging people to rekindle hope and embrace change. It also seems a long way from the **Year** of the Woman, which saw record numbers of women elected to Congress on the promise that new people would bring new solutions and sensitivities.

That was then. That was before a 12-**year**-old girl was snatched from her bedroom in Petaluma and slain. That was before Republicans like Gov. Pete Wilson and Democrats like Sen. Dianne Feinstein began talking tough **about** illegal **immigrants**, lending an air of **political** correctness to what had been a touchy subject. That was before

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economists started telling the rest of the country that happy days are here again, while California companies continued to lay off thousands.

"The well-being of the state is an issue right now," said Larry Gerston, a San Jose State University political science professor, who says preying on fears is a time-tested campaign strategy. "The fears come from stress, alienation, anxiety . . . the feeling that institutions have let us down."

Politicians know that crime, immigration and the economy are the most important issues because public opinion polls tell them so. It would be risky for a politician to promise to solve a problem that voters haven't focused on. Take the state budget, which is billions out of balance, says Bob Brownstein, San Jose Mayor Susan Hammer's budget director.

"Candidates are desperately trying to talk about anything but the main issues that confront the state," said Brownstein, who has railed against the state's recent practice of balancing the budget with money once set aside for cities, "because they have no idea how to solve them or they have no idea how to solve them in a way that the electorate will tolerate."

And so, the drumbeat continues. You're not safe in your home. You're not secure in your job. Immigrants are coming to take your piece of the pie.

Hardly inspiring stuff.

"There are no leaders who generate passion," said Sherry Bebitch Jeffe, a policy analyst at the Claremont Graduate School. "There is a sort of negative vision that says, 'If I don't watch out for myself, no one person, no one agency is going to be able to do it for me.'"

There is no mystery to the candidates' choice of campaign topics. Despite statistics showing a modest drop in violent crime, fear of crime has moved to the top of the problem list in public opinion polls. In the wake of the Polly Klaas slaying, drive-by shootings and random massacres, California residents now say they are as worried about crime as they are about the economy, according to a March Los Angeles Times Poll.

The fear of crime has consumed the country, according to a recent poll conducted by the New York Times and CBS. In September 1992, 10 percent of those asked said crime was the country's most serious problem. The economy was cited by 30 percent. In April, 25 percent had settled on crime as the biggest problem, while just over 15 percent said it was the economy.

"Now, people in the suburbs are feeling threatened and so it's a real issue," said Mark DiCamillo, director of the San Francisco-based Field Poll. "It permeates local politics as well as national politics."

Wilson, facing poor popularity ratings, has seized on crime. He hopes to portray his most likely challenger, Democrat Kathleen Brown, as weak. And so, Wilson used his State of the State speech to propose a \$2 billion prison building program and life sentences for child molesters.

Not to be outdone, state Treasurer Brown announced her challenge to Wilson from the steps of the police station where her grandfather worked. She included in her speech a hardy endorsement of the "three strikes, you're out" law, which some say the state cannot afford. It calls for sentences of 25 years to life for those convicted of a felony after previously having been convicted of two violent felonies.

Insurance Commissioner John Garamendi, who is running against Brown and state Sen. Tom Hayden in the Democratic primary, joined the chorus by calling for an end to the prisoners' bill of rights.

But crime is by no means the state's only problem. Both opinion polls and the politicians who read them say so. Mindful of a recent Field Poll, which shows that 61 percent of Californians say they are extremely concerned about illegal immigration, Wilson traveled to the Rio Grande in Texas to personally inspect a get-tough Border Patrol program that would be of questionable value along California's rugged border with Mexico. For her part, Brown

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proposed issuing tamper-proof Social Security cards and instituting a \$1 border crossing toll to help pay for beefed-up enforcement. Garamendi said he would see Brown's tamper-proof Social Security card and raise her night-vision goggles and high-intensity lights at the border to stop illegal crossings.

Seeking to stake out her own territory, Brown seized on the economy, a perennial worry and no doubt a sore subject for incumbent Wilson. Brown said she would create 1 million new jobs in her first term. It's a goal, she said, not a promise.

Wilson countered that in good times those jobs would create themselves, an interesting argument but one that hardly inspires hope among those facing unemployment.

In the end, there may be some cause for optimism. Come Wednesday, the campaigns will enter a new phase as the surviving candidates fight their way toward November's general election. Perhaps, the new phase will bring new and meaningful rhetoric.

Then again, perhaps not.

Notes

Voter's Guide for June 7 primary election

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Industry: COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (60%); DEFENSE INDUSTRY (56%)

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