

California on the Ballot **Executive Summary**

Written by Chelsea Davis

In the political experiment that is the American republic, California may be the most visible laboratory. What does the electoral history of a state often considered to be the seat of the nation's social, technological, and cultural innovation have to tell us about the future of American democracy, and its complex past? California Humanities set out to spark ongoing conversations on these topics through its California on the Ballot program, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's "Why it Matters: Civic and Electoral Participation" initiative, administered by the Federation of State Humanities Councils.

Taking place from October 2020 to April 2021, California on the Ballot overlapped with both a tumultuous presidential election and a controversial national census. The seven events of the series—all of them made free, public, and online due to the global COVID pandemic—invited audiences and expert guests to reflect on what civic engagement currently looks like in California, and what changes might soon be in store. Scholars, artists, journalists, civil servants, and archivists offered their perspectives through Zoom panel discussions, interviews, displays of historical artifacts, film clips, and Q&A sessions with viewers. The conversations tackled subjects ranging in geographical scope from the national (the [Electoral College](#)) to the regionally specific (the 22 acres of Alcatraz Island, whose nineteen-month occupation by Indians of All Tribes was the topic of [California Dreamin'](#)); from the centuries-long history of voting in California ([Show and Tell](#); [What's the Deal with Direct Democracy?](#)) to the future of the electorate ([Youth and the Ballot](#)); from the role that demographics play in our elections ([Voter Turnout](#)) to the proper place of the media in them ([The Fourth Branch](#)). Ultimately, California on the Ballot sought to give Californians the tools to participate in our democracy in a way informed by our state's electoral past but not bound by it.

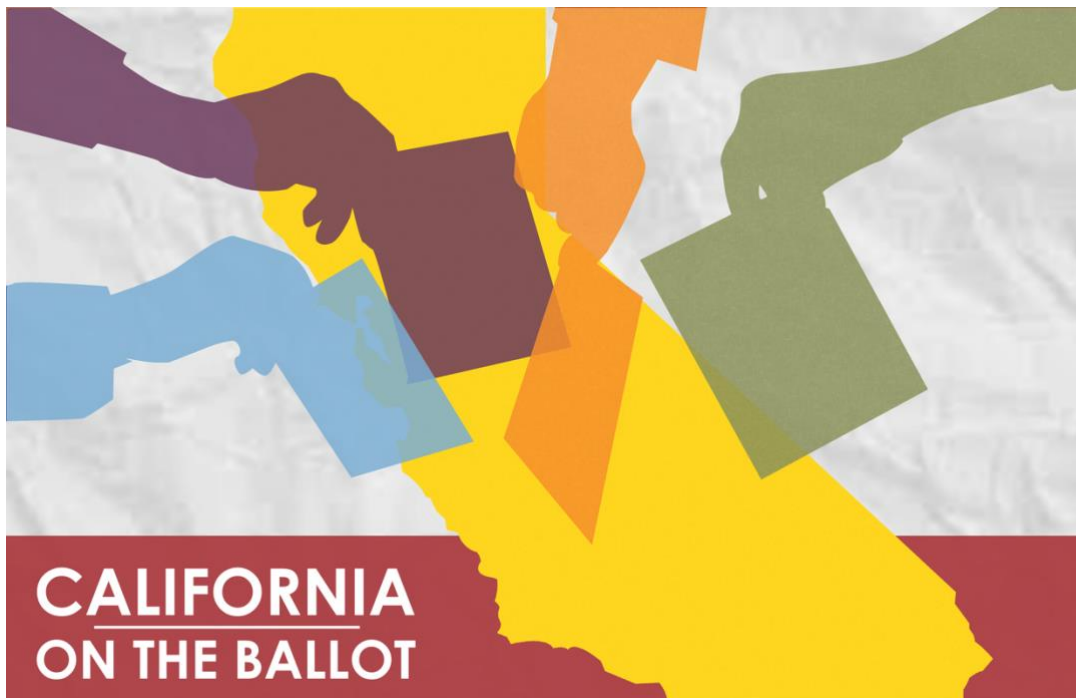
The suite of events touched time and again on California's position at the cutting edge of American political change. As we learned in the **Show and Tell** event, for instance, women's rights activists here developed a pioneering strategy for suffrage advocacy in the early twentieth century that was soon adapted by the movement nationwide. That revolutionary energy has long made California a welcoming stage for racial justice movements, too, from Black civil rights (**Show and Tell**) to Red Power (**California Dreamin'**). Yet studying the state's electoral history also reveals its sometimes-hidden conservatism, as panelists in **Direct Democracy**, **Show and Tell**, and **Voter Turnout** remarked. Examples of this include Propositions 8, 13, and 14 (overturning marriage equality, major property tax increases, and housing equality protections, respectively), as well as California's decades-long refusal to ratify the 15th Amendment, which protects the franchise for people of all races. "We think of California as this liberal, progressive place," said Shakirah Simley. "But there are a lot of times in which we had these forms of policy violence that really upheld white supremacy."

However, Californians have also successfully used their ballots to fight back against structural racism. **Show and Tell** spotlighted a photograph of Edward R. Roybal, who became the first person of Mexican descent in decades to serve on a city council after a wide multiracial coalition of supporters voted him in. And as the panelists of **Voter Turnout** noted, Latinx Californians turned out in 1994 in record numbers to defeat Proposition 187, which would have denied state services to undocumented immigrants. Indeed, as **Direct Democracy** and **Youth on the Ballot** also made clear, California's immigrant population exercises a profound influence over the state's electoral destiny.

Nor is the ballot box the only form of civic engagement that Californians enthusiastically embrace. The power of protest to bring about social change was a recurring theme throughout California on the Ballot, from the direct action that indigenous activists carried out on Alcatraz Island in 1969 (**California Dreamin'**) to the boycotts against employment discrimination led by the Congress of Racial Equality in Berkeley in the 1960s (**Show and Tell**). Speakers also cited grassroots efforts to register and educate Californians about voting as a simple but potent form of civic action in a state where many face material barriers to casting a ballot (**Voter Turnout, Show and Tell, Youth and the Ballot**).

Across events, speakers agreed that Californians urgently need better access to basic information about the logistics of voting and the legislation on a given ballot, both in school and beyond (**Direct Democracy, Electoral College, The Fourth Branch, Voter Turnout**). For this reason, several panelists argued that journalism and art can constitute political participation in and of themselves (**The Fourth Branch**). Thinking outside the (ballot) box is very much the way of California's future, to judge by the teenage journalists, filmmakers, and writers who took the stage in the **Youth and the Ballot** discussion. Samuel Getachew, Oakland's 2019 Youth Poet Laureate, described the political potential of creative work like his own spoken-word poetry in this way: "For me the most valuable way to show up as a member of my community as a global citizen, as a Black person... is through my art, my writing."

What California on the Ballot established perhaps most powerfully was that our state's oft-noted variety of cultures, languages, and opinions also yields a nearly infinite variety of possibilities for civic engagement. From writing poetry to running for office, from voter drives to direct actions, residents of the Golden State constantly seek new opportunities to forge a more just society—and will continue to do so as its electorate continues to diversify in the future. "The 'California Dream' is capacious," Dr. William Deverell observed as he interviewed Dr. Kent Blansett during **California Dreamin'**. "It can absorb hopes and wishes beyond the conventional Gold Rush dreaming that we tend to caricature. [It] can mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people."



Chelsea Davis is a writer and radio producer based in San Francisco. Her essays and poetry have appeared in the Los Angeles Review of Books, Literary Hub, Electric Literature, and the Public Domain Review, among other venues.

Her radio stories have been featured on podcasts such as 99 Percent Invisible, BackStory, and Out There, and have aired on stations including KALW 91.7 FM and KZYZ 90.7. She currently co-produces Pseudopod, a weekly horror fiction podcast.

When Chelsea isn't busy making stories, she studies them. She holds a PhD in English literature from Stanford University, where she also earned her Masters in English in 2014. While at Stanford, she received the Centennial Teaching Award and the Ric Weiland Graduate Fellowship.