

## Editorial: Explicit choices for state's future

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It's risky to make predictions, but here's one anyway: When historians look back 100 years from now, they will point to the next couple of years as a time that shaped California in the 21st century.

In the next few weeks, California's elected leaders must decide how to deal with a hole of \$24.3 billion or more in the state budget. As important as that is, though, it is not as important as the work that ordinary Californians must undertake for the longer term. They must decide what they want their state government to do and match that up with what they are willing to pay for. Ultimately, they will be deciding what kind of state they want California to be.

The first step toward that important decision is to understand what the choices really are. That won't be easy. Already the political forces that have helped forge the state's current mess are competing to frame the decisions that the state's residents must make.

From the left comes the view that California cannot afford to cut education, or student loans, or health services, or programs for the elderly or the mentally ill. But the plain fact is that with the state facing a deficit somewhere north of \$21 billion some or all of these public initiatives are going to lose money – big money.

From the right come other ideas, such as pushing the state into insolvency and ending all services for undocumented immigrants. But the state's problems are too complex and too large to yield to such simplistic ideas, as appealing as they may be.

In fact, a series of appealingly simple solutions from across the political spectrum is at the base of California's current dilemma. Over the past three decades, California's voters have decided that they wanted limited property taxes; longer prison terms for career criminals; term limits for lawmakers; and guaranteed minimum funding for education.

In isolation, none of these decisions created California's fiscal problem. But taken together, and combined with others at the state level and hundreds of similar decisions taken at the local level across California, they have contributed to a political environment in which Californians have acted as if they could have anything they want without worrying about the bills.

It should be clear that Californians can no longer act that way. The question is, how will they choose to act instead?

The first important task for Californians is to resolve to act differently. No longer can voters simply cast their ballots and then blame those they elected for whatever problems arise. Solving

California's problems will require that Californians become more engaged in governing the state – not by voting on ballot initiatives, but by being explicit about the choices they are making.

If they want to continue the state's current policies on crime and punishment – and that is certainly something they can choose to do – they will need to acknowledge to themselves and to their fellow Californians the true cost of those policies. They will need to say, in effect: Yes, we know that it's cutting into money for state universities, but that's a choice we're making. We can't afford to do both, so we're choosing long prison terms over more money for higher education.

There's a big difference between making such a choice explicitly and making it by default, without ever acknowledging that a choice has been made. The difference is one of responsibility, and that is the nature of the important work that Californians face in the weeks ahead.

The bills have been piling up for years. Now, they have come due. It's time for Californians to take responsibility for their decisions and the impact those decisions make on their state's future. If they do, historians will look back on the coming years as a golden age for the Golden State.