

# Gavin Newsom Is Playing the Long Game

California's governor has been touted as the Democrats' best shot in 2028. But first he'll need to convince voters that he's not just a slick establishment politician.

By [Nathan Heller](#) February 1, 2026

"He has been *very* careful not to get himself in a position where negatives become a liability," Willie Brown, a former mayor of San Francisco, said. Photograph by Jeff Minton for The New Yorker

At a union hall in San Diego last November, Gavin Newsom—the tall, coiffed governor of California, and, since last year, one of the Democrats' best hopes for pulling together a shattered country—stood to one side in white shirtsleeves and waited for his turn to address the crowd. His gaze moved carefully across the audience as union leaders spoke. A recurrent phenomenon among California governors, who tend to run glamorous, is playing against type. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a man once known for toting a bazooka, turned himself into a sober-suited policy wonk. Jerry Brown, a onetime figure of "pop politics," emerged as a curmudgeon. For Newsom, a middle-aged man with a large,

young family, a glow of professional attainment, and, most days, enough Oribe Crème in his hair to dress a good Crab Louie, the challenge has been to look both humble and concerned. He slumped his shoulders as he listened, as if to shrink his frame. When he nodded, he bent from the waist—not just agreeing but offering small, grateful bows.

“I think we all know why we’re here,” he said, taking the microphone. It was a few days before a statewide special election, and Newsom was speaking to a local chapter of the United Domestic Workers, whose members, largely women of color, had assembled for a rally with the Governor. “Trump knows he’s going to lose the midterms,” he said.

“He knows that, this time next year, there’s not going to be a Speaker Johnson, that there’s going to be a Speaker Hakeem Jeffries. He knows that his Presidency, as we know it”—he slowed his speech portentously—“is going to come to an end.”

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Newsom had spent weeks campaigning for a statewide ballot measure, called Proposition 50, that would redistrict

California and create five likely Democratic seats. In the early days of his career, he studied the speechmaking of Bobby Kennedy and Bill Clinton. Behind a lectern, his gestures still have a rehearsed feel. When he takes the microphone and roams, however, he moves like a boxer, holding his forearms up and parallel, wrists toward each other, right hand crossing to left shoulder, as if blocking. His knees bounce as he comes to a rhetorical peak.

"He's trying to rig the election before even one vote is cast," he said of the President's gerrymandering efforts. "What did he say to the governor of Texas, Greg Abbott? He said, 'I'm quote-unquote entitled'—*entitled*—'to five seats.' Now, never in the history of this country has the President of the United States used those words."

Proposition 50, which aimed to offset Texas's gerrymandered Republican advantage until 2030, was, for Newsom, the end of a startlingly eventful year. On January 7, 2025, three and a half hours after the ignition of the Palisades Fire, he stood on an adjoining street, amid a flurry of embers, and coordinated what became one of the largest fire responses in state history. Five months later, after protests against *ICE* raids broke out in L.A. and President Trump federalized more than four thousand members of the California National Guard without the approval of the Governor, Newsom filed a lawsuit—one of fifty-four that the

state of California has brought against the second Trump Administration. In mid-August, the Governor's official X account began mocking the President in his own addled, grandiose, all-caps style. ("*DONALD 'TACO' TRUMP, AS MANY CALL HIM, 'MISSED' THE DEADLINE!!!*") Newsom announced the California redistricting campaign later that month; his favorability ratings jumped ten percentage points in the second half of the year.

The events gave him a national profile unusual for a sitting governor. A weighted average of polls asking whom people would vote for now among Democratic Presidential possibilities—a calculation that, at this stage, usually tracks name recognition—has Newsom neck and neck with former Vice-President Kamala Harris. "It's pulse or no pulse, spine or no spine," Manny Yekutieli, a civic leader and candidate for city supervisor in Newsom's home town of San Francisco, told me. "He's reminding people that the Democrats have a perspective. They can play the game. We can do bombastic tweets!"

In the San Diego union hall, Newsom spun around and said, "Donald Trump's at Mar-a-Lago this week. No one wants to campaign with him!" He let a cheer rise, and added (he once went through a Tony Robbins phase), "The future is inside of us, not in front of us." In his memoir, "Young Man in a Hurry," to be published later this month, he seeks to align his own

story of becoming—from a hopeful, troubled childhood to the eve of his inauguration as the leader of “the most daring, magical, cursed, blessed state”—with the needs of a nation still finding its way.

Newsom with his wife, Jennifer Siebel Newsom, and their four children, at his second gubernatorial inauguration, in January, 2023. Newsom confided to a colleague that he had dreamed of the governorship since his youth. Photograph by Yalonda M. James / San Francisco Chronicle / AP

For years, Newsom has cultivated the air of an accidental politician. He notes that, in his twenties, he was a wine entrepreneur: with support from the dynastic businessman and composer Gordon Getty, he launched a wine shop, then a café, and then a vineyard and other projects, called PlumpJack (a Falstaff epithet, in “Henry IV, Part 1”). Today, he owns, partly in a blind trust designed to avoid conflicts of interest, stakes in offshoot enterprises with names like the Falstaff Management Group, Inc. He tells people that, if his political career ended tomorrow, he would return to life in business, and what a mercy that would be. But the feint convinces almost no one, because Newsom is perhaps the least Falstaffian man in wine. He starts texting at seven in the morning. He dresses each day as if for the meeting that will change his life. His holdings earn him, passively, more than a million dollars a year, enough to live on and more, and yet there he is, week after week, taking notes in policy binders, standing in the sun along the border—a guy so all in for the

public grind, it seems, that he has turned even the simple pleasures in life, like poking fun at the President's unhinged posts, into a statehouse chore.

In 1996, when Newsom first entered public office, at the age of twenty-eight, there was a feeling that he would flourish without ascending to the top—too slick, too swank, too smug, too hard for regular people to connect with. (As one of his opponents at the time put it to me, "He was misguided *and* elite.") Three decades later, that criticism is unchanged, but his prospects have transformed. Newsom, now fifty-eight, has never lost an election. He has spent more than twenty consecutive years in executive office, and is finishing his second term as the leader of the most populous and powerful state in the Union. His approval ratings drift like summer clouds above fifty per cent, and his congressional-redistricting campaign is central to the Democrats' play for power this fall. During what was expected to be his lame-duck year, the Governor is accelerating, leaving observers with a newly urgent version of a lasting question: What, exactly, is Gavin Newsom in it for?

"California is America, but only more so," the Governor told Bill Clinton onstage in New York, during Climate Week, in September. The two men both wore navy suits; a small stand bearing navy mugs sat between them. "It's the most diverse state in the world's most diverse democracy. Twenty-seven

per cent of my state is foreign-born. We practice pluralism—a point of pride."

The audience applauded pluralism; Newsom pressed on. "We dominate in every critical industry," he said. "Yes, we're the fourth-largest economy in the world, \$4.1 trillion a year, but we dominate with more engineers, more scientists, more Nobel laureates, more venture capital, the finest system of public higher education in the world." He spread his arms, as if clearing a tabletop. "We have no peers."

For most of the twentieth century, California was a purple state; it voted red in fourteen out of twenty-five Presidential elections. But it has been a blue stronghold for fifteen years, and that period has coincided with both increases in its economic fortunes and an intensification of conservative attacks. Since the pandemic, it has been fashionable for Republicans to stand on San Francisco street corners and point to homeless people, spinning out a story of apocalyptic decay that, they say, results from Democratic leadership. Newsom argues the inverse. Since his first year as governor, he has promoted an idea of California as a terrarium for Democratic principle—enshrining reproductive rights in the state constitution, upholding sanctuary-state policies, pushing for police reform—while emphasizing its successes over its failures. California, the closest thing to a test zone for the blue economy, is home to roughly half of all American

unicorn startups, which are valued at more than a billion dollars each, and technologists who made a show of fleeing because of taxes and regulations, like Elon Musk, have returned to found A.I. firms. "The Republicans' governing thesis cannot be true if California succeeds," Jason Elliott, a former deputy chief of staff in Newsom's office, told me. "We disprove their ideas that pluralism is a recipe for failure, that completely deregulated capital is the only way to grow." He added, "It drives them fucking crazy!"

The California governorship is not usually a role of international leadership, but Newsom has given it the appearance of one. Three months after his inauguration, in 2019, he travelled to El Salvador and met with the country's President and President-elect. In 2023, after the October 7th attacks, he flew to Israel to meet with Benjamin Netanyahu, of whom he later pronounced himself "not a big fan." (Newsom has asserted Israel's right to self-defense while condemning the civilian casualties in Gaza, to which California sent more than a hundred pallets of medical supplies.) He joined Xi Jinping in China to discuss climate reform and human rights.

"He understands that California is one of the leading places for the U.S. to try to compete with China," Reid Hoffman, a founder of LinkedIn, told me. In 2023, a low ebb in Newsom's approval ratings, a pundit suggested that Californians felt

“left out” of all this travel. But Newsom’s shadow diplomacy, widely seen as a pretentious distraction during the Biden years, has a different look at a moment of nativism and trade conflict in Washington. At the World Economic Forum conference, in Davos, last month, the Governor was denied entry to the U.S. pavilion, where he was scheduled to speak; his team blamed the White House, which claimed to know nothing.

In some cases, Newsom’s position on issues has changed as he has taken on a broader view. In 2016, as lieutenant governor, he advocated for shutting down the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, in central California, to facilitate a clean-energy transition. As governor, he pushed to keep it open, with the paradoxical rationale that clean energy was too important to risk relying on prematurely: a failure in the grid could require a return to fossil fuels and undermine the fuller project’s credibility.

The Governor, who has not changed his cellphone number since becoming mayor of San Francisco, in 2004, has nine thousand twenty-two personal contacts on his phone, and is in touch with a startling number of them as he tries to widen his view. “It’s like his focus group,” Jim DeBoo, a former gubernatorial chief of staff, told me. “And his media consumption is very right wing—all I watched when I was his chief of staff was Fox and Newsmax.” (These days, Newsom

reads the Righting, a morning summary of right-wing blogs.) He catches nascent changes in the political weather. "During early *COVID*, he kept telling me, 'Crime—there's something here,' " DeBoo told me. DeBoo studied the latest crime statistics and saw nothing unusual. He brushed off the worry. Then new numbers came out, showing a large pandemic spike in shoplifting and car theft, and concerns about crime exploded into the headlines.

Last March, judging the winds, Newsom launched a podcast, "This Is Gavin Newsom." His first guest was the right-wing influencer Charlie Kirk. On air, he told Kirk that he thought transgender athletes competing in professional women's sports was "deeply unfair." The comment, like the interview, earned him opprobrium from progressives, for seemingly pandering to right-wing voters.

"I lost a lot of good friends over that—they thought it was betrayal," Newsom told me one afternoon, in his Sacramento office. But "I thought, Why aren't we organizing the campuses? This is an interesting guy." Six feet three, he had curled himself, like Gumby, into an "S" shape, knees sideways, in the corner of a blue-gray sofa. He and his team, he said, "couldn't figure out how to, quote-unquote, make it fair. We came up with a compromise this last year that only, I think, infuriated everybody—multiple medals." He laughed unhappily.

In public, Newsom speaks often and openly about his errors, fortifying his image as a bumptious, slightly hapless victim of his own enthusiasms. But some think he plays a longer game than he lets on. "He has been very careful not to get himself in a position where negatives become a liability," Willie Brown, a former mayor of San Francisco, said.

Take the Charlie Kirk interview. If Newsom were to run for national office in a couple of years, he would be subjected to the right's usual claims that Californians are latte-sipping vegan leftists. "Democrats were so traumatized by 2024, and I could see a bunch of people saying, 'We're just not going to do this California thing again,' " the Democratic campaign strategist and political analyst James Carville told me. "Part of his selling will have to be, I can play in the middle of the country—I can play fresh water and I can play salt water." A candidate who has a record of setting up colloquies with *MAGA* loyalists and sharing some of their positions might have an easier time. (Newsom's next two guests on his podcast were Michael Savage and Steve Bannon.)

Cartoon by Harry Bliss

Or take Newsom's rise to the governorship. In the spring of 2009, Newsom, still serving as mayor, was the only major Democrat running. Bill Clinton endorsed him. Then Jerry Brown, the former governor, organized a committee to

explore running again. Newsom decided to withdraw and run for lieutenant governor, biding his time in exchange for entrée to Sacramento in Brown's shadow. Restraint became his path to power. Six years later, when Barbara Boxer announced that she was retiring from the U.S. Senate, Newsom took the extraordinary step of posting on Facebook that he didn't want the job. "It's always better to be candid than coy," he wrote. By taking himself out of the running, though, he left the powerful Senate position—which would keep its winner out of California for half the year—open to other rising stars, such as Kamala Harris.

Proposition 50 can be understood as a similar gambit: a riposte to the White House's gerrymandering which was grounded in sincerity but doubled as a strategic move. If the initiative passed, it would show both that Newsom could run a long-shot mobilization campaign and that he could draw together a divided party. In a video that the Governor released in the run-up to the election, Democrats from Barack Obama to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Elizabeth Warren voiced their support for the measure.

On the Saturday before Election Day, Newsom held a redistricting rally at the Los Angeles Convention Center. The Minnesota senator Amy Klobuchar spoke. Jasmine Crockett, a Texas congresswoman who has been a vocal critic of the Trump Administration, came onstage in stiletto cowboy ankle

boots to praise the Governor. ("He saw what was happening in Texas, and he said, 'Not on my watch!' ") Harris appeared. Then came Newsom—the culminating act. He tossed white T-shirts reading "*TRUMP IS NOT HOT*" into the crowd and rhapsodized about the proposition and "how it's brought these remarkable elected leaders together."

"Newsom for President!" someone yelled from the crowd.

The Governor tapped his chest—an acknowledgment without acceptance—and went on talking.

A riser to the left of the stage was filled with twenty influencers, live-streaming to their audiences. "It's something that we now prioritize in everything we do," Lindsey Cobia, a senior political adviser, told me of the influencers. Newsom thinks the *MAGA* movement has mastered a form of ambient, non-stop messaging that the Democrats have not; his focussed work feeding his narratives to influencers, much of it invisible to consumers of mainstream media, may account in part for his name recognition.

"He spends most of his time talking to those folks and less of his time talking to more of the traditional reporters these days," Cobia explained. She and other staffers collaborate on writing Newsom's Trumpy posts, though a few gags, like a running joke about the Governor selling Newsom Kneepads

—“for all your groveling to Trump needs”—are Newsom’s own. Last year, Newsom’s personal social-media accounts gained more than five million new followers, and clocked billions of views and impressions. Newsom’s team calculated that the L.A. rally was live-streamed, from the gaggle in the influencer box, to a hundred and fifty million viewers. “And if I go on Jake Tapper this afternoon?” Sean Clegg, one of his political advisers, told me. “I’m fucking talking to eighty thousand people in California.”

Newsom’s father, William A. Newsom III, was a lawyer of an establishment sort. His family arrived in San Francisco in the nineteenth century, from Ireland, and joined other ambitious, civic-minded Catholics. Newsom described his grandfather, nicknamed the Boss, as “like this”—he intertwined his fingers—with Pat Brown, who served as governor through most of the nineteen-sixties. The two of them developed a friendship when Newsom ran Brown’s campaign for San Francisco district attorney; as governor, Brown awarded Newsom a concession to operate a ski resort in Olympic Valley, then known as Squaw Valley, with a partner named John Pelosi, the father-in-law of the future congresswoman. In high school, Gavin Newsom’s father, Bill, befriended Gordon and John Paul Getty, Jr., whose father was then on the verge of becoming the wealthiest man in the world, and remained close to them all his life. In 1975, Bill was appointed to a Superior Court, then to a state Court of Appeal, by Pat

Brown's son, Jerry. Bill had two degrees in literature. "He was a total intellect, revered by everybody," Gavin's younger sister, Hilary, said. The world of Democratic fund-raising was never far away.

Gavin and Hilary's parents separated when Gavin was three. Their mother, Tessa, eventually moved the kids from the family home, in the Marina District of San Francisco, and bought what Hilary calls "a little gray house," in the flats of the suburb Corte Madera, across the Golden Gate Bridge. To make money, Tessa at times took on boarders and had as many as three jobs at once. In "Young Man in a Hurry," Newsom recalls these years as pared to the bone—"We raised ourselves on giant bowls of mac and cheese and thought nothing of it"—if occasionally enlivened by vacations with the Gettys. Some former associates dismiss this description as a strategic reinterpretation of a largely privileged youth. (One described it to me as Newsom's "I was born a poor Black child" story—a reference to the parodic opening monologue of Steve Martin's 1979 comedy, "The Jerk.") Bill Newsom moved to a town a few hours away, near Tahoe, and the children saw him, at most, once a month. Handoffs happened at the Nut Tree, a minor amusement park in the outer-bay town of Vacaville, a place between places. Hilary told me, "When my mom picked us back up, Gavin would just cling to my father's legs and cry."

Newsom was profoundly dyslexic. At first, his parents enrolled him at a French bilingual school and then at École Notre Dame des Victoires, a French Catholic institution that his father had attended. By the third grade, he had worked himself into a panic over his trouble with reading and math. "I'm faking being sick, because I hate school and I'm stressed, and they're always having to pick me up early," he recalled. Newsom switched to a public school in Marin County. He was a scrawny, shy boy with a bowl cut. "He always called himself stupid," his sister said, and other kids apparently agreed. "The guys kept saying, 'If you're looking for your brother, he's hanging from his underwear on a lamppost.' "

In middle school, Newsom took steps to reinvent himself as an athlete. "Rocky" had recently come out, and he emulated the main character—running up and down hills, drinking raw eggs, learning to box. His sister remembers falling asleep night after night listening to the sound of him relentlessly practicing basketball: shooting, shooting, shooting, shooting.

Learning to read was a similar feat. When I asked Newsom about his dyslexia in his office one afternoon, he showed me an overstuffed folder of printed material, his reading from the previous evening. Almost every word of text was underlined. He flipped through a galley proof of his memoir, in which the

underlining covered whole pages—the only way, he said, that he could read any book, even his own. He produced another folder filled with lined paper and covered with his handwriting: he copies all the text he underlines onto writing pads.

Newsom, center, with Peter and Billy Getty, at the opening party for the PlumpJack wine shop, in 1992. Photograph by Steve Castillo / San Francisco Chronicle / Getty

Next, he brought out a stack of canary-yellow index cards, thick as a sandwich. It was covered in his scrawl. From the lined pages, he distills the material and copies things a second time onto the cards. “And, from here, it goes in right in there,” he said, gesturing to his head.

This process of underlining, copying, and recopying is the backbone of Newsom’s working life. He spends his ninety-minute commute—between Kentfield, in Marin, where he lives with his wife, the documentary filmmaker Jennifer Siebel Newsom, and their four children, and Sacramento, where he usually overnights once or twice a week—making notations in the back seat of the gubernatorial S.U.V. Between meetings and after dinner, the pads and cards come out. What he described as the resulting “hundreds and thousands and tens of thousands” of pieces of paper lived for a while as ballast in the trunk of his car. Today, they occupy an unofficial archive off the Governor’s office, with a

filing system of his own conception. If an adviser tells Newsom something that strikes him as odd, he has been known to vanish into his archive, emerge with a folder ("There are, like, *tabs* and things," Jason Elliott told me with horror), and extract a note proving that, months ago, the same adviser told him something else.

Because of his reading struggles, Newsom rarely gives long written speeches; instead, he memorizes. (He sees the lines of text on a teleprompter screen as a single image, like a Chinese character, which he uses to recall the next line.) Lindsey Cobia told me, "A four-hour podcast where he gets asked about everything from U.F.O.s to his policy on assisted suicide is actually a more comfortable space for him, because of his dyslexia, than reading a ten-minute speech." Lateefah Simon, a Bay Area congresswoman, who shared consultants with Newsom during the 2020 Democratic National Convention, recalled that they left to help him with speech prep—normally a half-hour task. "I didn't see them for, like, three hours," she said. "He wanted to do it over and over."

Simon met Newsom twenty-five years ago, when she was the director of the Young Women's Freedom Center, an organization representing girls in the juvenile-justice system. She was chanting with a bullhorn outside his office in protest of his approach to welfare. "The electeds *never* come out to

see you," she said. But Newsom did, and he listened to the protesters' grievances for an hour. "At the end, he said, 'My office is always open to all of you.' " Simon began watching his press conferences. "I would tell my members, 'Write his stats down, and let's check them—because he has no notes!' " Newsom's stats checked out; he can "drill down," as he put it, on almost any subject at the slightest invitation. He sometimes gives the impression of a man with more stamina for talking than people have for listening.

On the campaign trail, Newsom has a mental stack of cue cards that he riffs on the way a jazz pianist might improvise from a chord chart. His movements through the language can be weird. ("The rule of law, not the rule of Don, and I hope it's *dawning* on people" is a construction that he has found fit to repeat on air.)

*"Prove to me you can be nice to people."*

Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Hilary, who is now the co-president of PlumpJack, sees his displays of esoteric knowledge as compensatory. In the family, she was thought to take after their brilliant, charismatic father. "My mom was incredibly shy, and always told everyone that Gavin was just like her—but she was super critical of herself," she said. "I think there was this quiet rebellion in him that wanted to say, I'm not like that." In high school, he began slicking his hair, wearing suits, and

carrying a briefcase, inspired by the TV show "Remington Steele." He was trying to channel the era's buffed iconography of masculine power, but came off like Alex P. Keaton. "I remember paying him five dollars to go to the Levi's store in San Rafael with me and get a pair of Shrink-to-Fit jeans, because I'm, like, 'You're bad for *my* luck in high school,'" Hilary said. In light of his trajectory from problem child to aloof entrepreneur, Newsom, who is said to be planning a run for higher office, has an opportunity to become America's first Gen X President.

Today, Newsom's political consultants offer his four decades of hair-gel use as proof of a trueness to self. Sean Clegg told me, "The presentation of Newsom is authentically Newsom!" The argument is not entirely persuasive, because a teenager who comes to school with a suit and a briefcase is really just wearing what Newsom himself likens to "costumes." And the Governor still un-slicks himself for those he knows best. Lori Puccinelli Stern, one of his best friends, said that when he's off the clock "there's not a hair-gel bottle in sight. His hair is *long*. I always say, if you put little glasses on him, he'd be an adult version of Harry Potter."

Newsom, who at times can seem more like the Tom Cruise of politics, more successful than beloved, has been at pains to make it clear to people that the suave, wealthy glad-hander

is a role he imagined himself into, not the way he was born. ("It's why I wrote a book," he told me.) Is that a message that will resonate across the political spectrum? "He has branded himself as the guy who will take on all comers, and right now that's popular branding among Democrats—the only person challenging him on that position is Pritzker," James Carville said, referring to the governor of Illinois. "The question for Newsom is: Can he walk into a Black church in South Carolina and engage the audience? That's to be determined."

On Election Day last year, the Governor stopped by the office of his communications adviser and flopped into a chair. He had spent three hours reading about electric-vehicle policy before his first meeting that morning and was feeling the strain.

"It's a hell of a way to start every single day," he said. "How many books I could have read! Literature! Philosophy! I think about my life, honestly. I could have gone through the Library of Congress. I could have been someone! I could have *wisdom!*"

His communications adviser, a former investigative journalist named Bob Salladay, nodded, playing along. A trace of Newsom's childhood shyness lingers in his fondness for performing comedic riffs, usually delivered in a key of ironic self-lament, which insulate him from more direct

engagement. He was dressed in a white shirt, dusky-blue suit trousers, and a blue tie knotted, with two crisp dimples, into a four-in-hand. The social-media menswear guru Derek Guy, in a post on Newsom and neckties, pronounced him "one of the few politicians left who knows how to wear one."

"This guy is not screwing around," Newsom said gravely, of the President. He tilted his head self-consciously toward the floor and flashed a chatoyant line of a smile. As a young man, he was often described in the media as having movie-star good looks. He certainly wields his face the way a movie star does: with the care and precision with which most people handle power tools. "Everything we asserted would happen has happened," he said. "We said he was going to send *ICE* out on Election Day—and that's what he did in L.A."

The day before, it had been reported that about a hundred *ICE* and Border Patrol agents had been stationed near Dodger Stadium; Newsom believed that this was meant to intimidate voters. Video circulated online of federal agents detaining an American citizen outside a Home Depot, then driving off in the man's car with his toddler still strapped in the back seat.

"I actually was physically shaking," Newsom said. "And the cries of the people videotaping it, saying, 'Who the hell are you? What kind of people are you?' " He grimaced. "People who don't like the word 'dictator,' they're not going to hear

the next word you say. But they *are* acts of an authoritarian."

The Governor sank back further in his chair, as if trying to change the mood, and told Salladay that he had been reading Walt Whitman. He alluded to the poem "O Me! O Life!," in which the speaker decides that the purpose of living is to do one's part. Then he paused self-consciously. "Walt Whitman—Jesus!" he said. "I'm becoming my father."

Newsom, as a San Francisco supervisor, championed Care Not Cash, a controversial homelessness measure that sought to replace much of the county's cash welfare with mental-health, substance-abuse, and housing services. Photograph by Justin Sullivan / Getty

That day, the media had set up cameras at the headquarters of the California Democratic Party, not far away. As evening came, Newsom's staff convened at the governor's mansion, where he doesn't live, to wait for returns. Newsom's office was telling the press that the redistricting proposition would likely pass by ten points, but its internal polling put the lead closer to fifteen or twenty.

CNN and the Associated Press called the election right after polls closed. The measure ultimately passed by twenty-nine points—"not just a win, an overwhelming win," Senator Alex Padilla, who previously oversaw elections as California's secretary of state, told me. The Governor appeared with his wife after Zohran Mamdani, the newly elected mayor of New York, finished his victory speech, clearing the airwaves.

Facing a phalanx of cameras, Newsom declared victory and urged other blue states to follow California's lead.

"My call tonight, in the spirit of Whitman, who talked about 'the powerful play goes on'—we all must contribute a verse," he said. "And so we need the state of Virginia. We need the state of Maryland. We need our friends in New York and Illinois and Colorado." He swept a severe gaze from camera to camera. "It is *all* on the line."

Newsom's path to politics ran through retail. The PlumpJack wine store, which he opened in 1992, with an initial investment of fifteen thousand dollars from Gordon Getty, among others, and the partnership of his son Billy, was a pioneer in accessible pricing and the now familiar genre of information-rich sales. ("The thing with this terroir . . .") It caught a rising yuppie wave, and Newsom felt creative power for the first time. To this day, he eagerly takes credit for popularizing screw-top wine.

In 1995, Willie Brown was elected mayor of San Francisco. He had hundreds of appointments to make, and Newsom had distinguished himself by introducing Brown to his and Getty's circle after hours. Newsom gently angled for a seat on the Film Commission, but Brown appointed him to the Parking and Traffic Commission without asking whether he wanted the position. "I said, 'I'm sure he's smart enough to be willing to do the job,'" Brown recalled. In 1997, when a

Board of Supervisors seat opened between elections, Brown appointed Newsom to that post, too. "The vacancy occurred at a time when I really wanted to focus on diversity," Brown told me. "And there was not a straight white male on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors."

The city's eleven-person legislature had been roiled for decades by infighting between its left and center-left factions. Newsom, with his Getty connections and his business suits, put his leftist colleagues immediately on guard. "The first couple of weeks, I thought he was arrogant and sure of himself," Tom Ammiano, an activist turned board member, told me. Aaron Peskin, another supervisor who leaned left, said that Newsom vacillated all the way to the end, as if awaiting the arrival of new information. "Yes meant no, no meant yes, maybe meant no," Peskin said. "Everybody was, like, Do not count him as your sixth vote."

Newsom explains his fickleness differently. "I have a difficult time with ideologues on both sides of the aisle," he said. On the board, he grew frustrated by people complaining about systemic problems and then falling in lockstep behind their like-minded colleagues. "There *are* systemic challenges—I'm mindful of that—but I saw so much of that victim mentality in my early days of politics in San Francisco. I was exhausted by it," he told me. "Like, why aren't we doing the things that need to be done to *so/ve* for this?"

*"Crap, that was today?"*

Cartoon by Dan Misdea

Pragmatism, in politics, is a practice of working backward from desired outcomes, rather than forward from abstract ideals. Newsom's first major pragmatic effort was a homelessness measure called Care Not Cash, which replaced much of the county's cash welfare with mental-health, substance-abuse, and housing services. Street homelessness had been a Rubik's Cube of a problem in San Francisco for decades. On a self-appointed mission, Newsom travelled to study homelessness programs in New York and Chicago. Back home, he met the director of the Haight Ashbury Free Clinic, which served many unhoused patients. He told Newsom to visit around the first and the fifteenth of the month, when welfare checks were delivered. Overdose cases spiked around those days. "He said, 'You're killing people,'" Newsom recalled. "It just shifted my mind."

Care Not Cash passed as a ballot proposition in 2002, securing Newsom's political reputation as a young man who could turn the puzzle sideways. Critics saw it as something more cynical: a play to voters' impulses to punish people on the street, replacing their ability to spend or save with unbankable services and creating supply issues at temporary shelters. Ammiano described the program to me as "a gimmick, and very inhumane"; Newsom received death threats. Jason Elliott characterized Newsom's approach as

an artifact of its era. "Permanent supportive housing is now very well socialized but was not twenty-five years ago," he said. Homelessness numbers improved in the short term.

Yet homelessness in California—and San Francisco—has not gone away; if anything, it represents a growing American crisis. Newsom likes to point out that California had no statewide homelessness policies when he became governor. He rattled off a list of programs, from special grants for finding housing to conservatorship reform, that he launched during his tenure. On housing, the Governor has been an ally of State Senator Scott Wiener, one of the legislative leaders of the *YIMBY* (Yes in my back yard) movement, which aims to alleviate housing-supply shortages to improve affordability. "He knows we need to zone for more housing and make it easier to get permits," Wiener said. "You never guarantee the Governor's signature, but ten out of ten times he has signed the bills." (Critics argue that *YIMBY* policies amount to open season for real-estate developers.) When I asked Newsom whether his thinking on homelessness had changed over the years—given his variety of efforts—he insisted that the same thread was "completely pulled through," just in ever-improving versions. "It's this notion of constant iteration, trial and error, throwing more things on the board, seeing what sticks," he said. "It's the entrepreneur in me."

Given that Newsom has openly taken on Trump; that he is ambitious, relentless, and connected; that he is not yet sixty, with four children and a wife who increasingly makes speeches alongside him; that he has written a bootstraps memoir; and that he has not had a month out of office in thirty years, many people are certain that he plans to run for President in 2028. Newsom has not refuted the possibility. "I'm not thinking about running, but it's a path that I could see unfold," he said last summer—a rumination that some found comically understated.

"He had that I-want-to-be-a-President vibe twenty-five years ago," Peskin, who recalled entering Newsom's supervisor office for the first time and coming face to face with a bust of J.F.K., told me. In 2004, Nancy Pelosi told this magazine that she thought about a Newsom Presidency. (Recently, she told me that she had no memory of saying so, then added, "I do know, from the standpoint of leadership, vision, and values, knowledge of the issues, strategic thinking about how to get things done . . . he's masterful.") Others are less circumspect. Wiener told me, "He'd probably kill me for saying this, but I think he's going to run." Willie Brown said, matter-of-factly, "I think he's had that in mind from Day One."

Newsom, who dutifully records every explanation he hears for the Democrats' losses in 2024 on a list that now runs to

twenty-seven pages, is routinely described as the front-runner for the Democratic nomination—an odd claim about a race in which nobody is yet running. If he were to emerge as the Democrats' nominee for 2028, he would be the second consecutive San Francisco politician to secure that role, after Harris. In recent years, San Francisco, a seven-by-seven-mile port whose population has never exceeded nine hundred thousand, has produced a Vice-President, a Speaker of the House, and a number of redoubtable legislators, making it perhaps the country's hottest forge for powerful Democrats. The heat comes partly from the city's all-pervading tech industry—"the center of the universe right now," as one lawmaker put it to me—but also from a grassroots culture that perennially wrestles the establishment. San Francisco hasn't elected a Republican supervisor or mayor for half a century, but its liberal orthodoxies are represented by passionately disparate factions. "Kamala used to say, If you're running for office in the Bay Area, it's like a knife fight in a phone booth," Lateefah Simon, who worked for Harris in the district attorney's office, said.

*"This is sort of going off what Lauren said . . . "*

Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

When Newsom ascended to the mayorship, in 2004, he was regarded as a bridge between the old San Francisco and a newer, more entrepreneurial one. "He wasn't an outsider to

politics, but he was willing to do things differently," one of his associates said. At the time, the L.G.B.T.Q. community was a swing vote pulled between a history of leftist outsider politics and the center-left interests of growing professional success. As the gay-marriage debate intensified, Newsom worked with city officials to change the marriage forms, and arranged for a ceremony for a lesbian couple. By the end of that evening, they had married dozens of gay couples; thousands followed.

The news of these marriages made headlines as far away as Australia. In the U.S., it made Newsom a pariah in his own party. Many people told me that, when Barack Obama visited San Francisco that year to fund-raise for his U.S. Senate run, he refused to be photographed with Newsom. (The Obama team has denied this account.) Senator John Kerry, who had just lost the 2004 Presidential election to George W. Bush, spoke at a private banquet in town. Peskin, then the president of the Board of Supervisors, recalls walking out after hearing Kerry claim that, were it not for Newsom alienating voters with this policy, he would be President. (A spokesperson for Kerry denied that he made this remark.) When I suggested to Pelosi that issuing marriage licenses to gay couples wasn't too daring of a move in San Francisco, she pointed to Newsom's Democratic career. "He had his own future at risk," she said. "Make no mistake—it took courage."

Today, of course, more than two-thirds of Americans support same-sex marriage, proving Newsom's political intuition correct. But gay marriage also proved what could be called Newsomism: a way of pushing policy out in front. In 2004, in an era defined by Clinton and Bush, common wisdom held that the romance of politics happened at the level of charm, values, and having-a-beer-ability; policy came later, fleshing out the details like a lawyer with a prenup. What gay marriage showed was that political courtship could flow the other way—from a daring policy to the politician behind it. "Gavin made a conscious decision not to visibly be part of the story," Michael Farrah, a longtime legislative aide to Newsom, said. "But, in the end, it helped his star rise more."

Meanwhile, Newsom's own private life had become a mess. In 2002, his mother, Tessa, who had breast cancer, died by assisted suicide. His sister, Hilary, who had mostly spent their mother's last days alone with her, all but stopped talking to him. "I was there, and I felt he wasn't," she said; he had buried himself in work. "He thought, if he didn't confront it, then it wouldn't happen."

Lori Puccinelli Stern described the period after Tessa's death as the only time she had ever seen Newsom despondent. "He didn't talk for two or three days," she said. "We were talking to him, but he wouldn't answer us."

The previous year, Newsom had married Kimberly Guilfoyle,

then a staffer in the left-leaning district attorney's office and more recently a Fox News host and a onetime fiancée of Donald Trump, Jr. (At present, she is the U.S. Ambassador to Greece.) The idea seems to have been for two ambitious people to double their luck together. The reality was closer to a fast-lane collision. When I asked Hilary about the marriage, she said, "Oh, God," and spent a moment in uncomfortable laughter. During their mother's illness, she thought, Newsom had "locked" his heart: "It wasn't, in my opinion, the authentic decision on my brother's part." A 2004 *Harper's Bazaar* photograph of the couple spooning in evening wear on a rug in Ann Getty's mansion was widely seen as vulgar and out of touch; two decades later, it remains one of the first things some Californians remember about Newsom. By the time it was published, Guilfoyle was spending a lot of time in New York, where she had taken a job as a host on Court TV. Divorce proceedings followed soon after.

In 2007, it became public that Newsom had engaged in an affair with the city's Commission Appointments Secretary, who was married. She resigned from her position and got retroactive pay for leave, which struck some people as unfair. She and Newsom having had City Hall offices surrounding that of her husband, a top Newsom aide, seemed somehow perverse. Of the revelations, Newsom announced, "Everything you've heard and read is true"—a

response that, in its unusual comprehensiveness, seemed to take the sport out of further investigation. Nine months later, he was reelected mayor.

As the mayor of San Francisco, Newsom issued same-sex marriage licenses in 2004; here, in 2008, he celebrates Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, who were the first couple to be married at City Hall. Photograph by Kimberly White / Corbis / Getty

By most accounts, Newsom's relationship with his current wife changed his course. She was the second oldest of five daughters in a Republican family who lived in the affluent Bay Area suburb of Ross and owned a ranch in Montana. Her older sister had died after being struck by a golf cart in which Jennifer, then six years old, had been sitting. In an interview with the *L.A. Times* in 2023, Siebel Newsom described her childhood efforts "to be perfect, to make my parents forget, by being two daughters instead of one." The couple's first date, in 2006, was blind; their second was the Red Tie Gala, for the Little Sisters of the Poor. Puccinelli Stern recalled, "He says to me, 'Can you guys meet for a drink downtown before?' And I said to my husband, 'Peter! There's someone disguised as Gavin Newsom on the phone actually making a plan!' "

They were used to having Newsom as their third wheel. ("He showed up on the plane when we were going to our honeymoon," Puccinelli Stern explained. "I said, 'What are you doing here?,' and he goes, 'You're not going on vacation

without me!' ") Months later, on a group trip, Newsom arrived with Siebel, looking as if "he'd seen a ghost," Puccinelli Stern said. "I walk up and I go, 'What the hell is the matter with you?' He goes, 'It was just awful. It was just us two on a plane for five and a half hours, and I had to talk about my emotions!' "

Newsom had become a heavy drinker. He began making daily visits to the president of the Delancey Street Foundation, a tough-love recovery center geared toward former prisoners and substance users. He stopped drinking for more than a year before going back to it with what is said to be moderation. Hilary credits Siebel, whom Newsom married in 2008, for forcing him to confront the death of their mother. "He had taken the Irish-dad approach: nothing to see here, all good, everybody's fine, let's get to work," she said. "Jen brought him out so that he could express himself."

When I asked Newsom about this transformation, he said, gnomically, "The mask came off"—perhaps an allusion to the documentary "The Mask You Live In," from 2015, made by his wife. It examines media ideals of masculinity and their constraining influence on boys and men. Newsom hosted Richard Reeves, the president of the American Institute for Boys and Men, on his podcast last spring. "Young boys and young men are searching for a script or a story of how to be a man today," Reeves told me. "The choice that they very

often face is the traditional 'This is what real men are,' from the right, or a deafening silence from the left, which has almost entirely told young men what *not* to be."

In 2020, fifty-six per cent of men younger than thirty voted for Joe Biden; in 2024, the same percentage voted for Trump. (Newsom, in his gubernatorial elections, has fared well among young voters, and has cut the general male vote down the middle.) *MAGA* support among young men is strong not only in working-class domains. A much circulated story published in *Compact* magazine in December posited a "lost generation" of millennial white men in élite fields—media, academia, tech—who privately felt discriminated against. "Most of the men I interviewed started out as liberals," the story's author, Jacob Savage, wrote. "Some still are."

The day that Newsom's episode with Reeves was released, the Governor signed an order directing various state agencies to support men and boys "suffering in silence," through mental-health programs, career-building opportunities, and recruitment in fields like teaching. Reeves told me, "What he wants to do, I think, is to be able to go to the Republicans and say, 'You talk a lot about boys and men, but what have you done? *I'm* doing it.' But there's also a style that is appealing to young men which is straightforward, jokey, sometimes a bit risk-taking, just rolling with the

punches." This is the style that Newsom has employed on broadcasts with figures like Kirk and in public quarrels with Joe Rogan. In Reeves's view, Newsom's efforts can align the Democratic Party's future with the fate of America's supposedly lost young men. For Newsom, however, it would also have a shadow benefit, transfiguring the roughest patch of his history, when he was a lost young man himself, into a political virtue.

Newsom once confided to Elliott that he'd dreamed of the governorship since he was young. He campaigned on bringing universal health care to California, having passed it in San Francisco as mayor. (As of 2023, approximately ninety-five per cent of Californians had health coverage, after an expansion of Medi-Cal, the state's Medicaid program; last year, Newsom announced a rollback of coverage for undocumented immigrants.) Within months of his inauguration, he issued a moratorium on death-row executions, redrew the route for California's forthcoming high-speed rail, rerouted a major water-tunnel project, made two years of community college free for first-time students, and rewrote laws to facilitate housing construction. "You generally *don't* want to make fast movements on big things, because you need to take the time to organize your constituent politics and your stakeholders," Elliott said. Newsom, who had spent much of his time as lieutenant governor travelling the state, felt "ready."

What he was less ready for was packaging this bursting portfolio into a political identity. Bob Salladay told me, "We work a lot on simplifying the story." Long after it was politically convenient, Newsom gushed to me about the Biden Administration's domestic platform. "What he was able to deliver from a policy perspective was next-level," he said. But Biden's messaging was so notoriously poor that most Americans were oblivious to what many consider the fullest program of worker-oriented policies since the New Deal. At their best, Newsom's policies—same-sex marriage, say, or redistricting—act as beacons and sparky hits. At their worst, they recall Bidenism: a weave of change that's underfoot before it has had a chance to be admired on the loom. "I used to get so frustrated, because I'd be, like, 'Hey! We're going to give away free community college. Can we just do that this year and call it a win?' " Jim DeBoo said. Instead, Newsom insisted that free tuition become part of a larger higher-education-reform plan with many interlocking pieces—a program that is hard to explain in fifteen seconds on TV.

On February 19, 2020, the Governor delivered a State of the State address about homelessness, pledging new funding for housing, substance-use treatment, mental health, and social services—a major, coordinated attempt to work the Rubik's Cube on every axis. Then it all went to the wind. On March 4th, a seventy-one-year-old who had recently come

off a cruise died of a strange new respiratory virus: California's first confirmed *COVID-19* death. Newsom declared a state of emergency that day.

Mass crises are unforeseen but not unknowable—there is precedent to consult, or at least experts. During the pandemic, leaders found themselves flying in the dark. “The best you could do was ‘Let’s talk to the Ebola czar. Let’s talk to historians who have studied the Spanish flu,’ ” Elliott said. “Shutting down the economy? *And* closing schools? There was no precedent.”

The Governor met President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump at Los Angeles International Airport before they visited the area devastated by the Palisades Fire. Photograph by Mandel Ngan / AFP / Getty

Newsom tacked toward caution. On March 19th, he issued the country's first statewide stay-at-home order. By mid-April, he was outlining a process for economic reopening, which he backtracked on when the state experienced a summer surge. “We had to have tough conversations about what was happening in the community and businesses closing,” Robert Garcia, a congressman who was then the mayor of Long Beach, and who lost both of his parents to the virus, said. Newsom's vigilance suppressed California's infection rate during the first wave of cases, letting it avoid the deadly hospital overload of states such as New York, whose death rate in 2020 was twice as high. Yet his personal

recklessness brought the first great challenge of his governorship.

In November, 2020, a Fox station broadcast photographs of Newsom eating maskless at a twelve-person birthday dinner in Napa Valley, in contravention of his own recommendation that Californians avoid large gatherings. Other guests included medical executives and a lobbyist, which looked bad, and the restaurant was one of California's most rarefied, the French Laundry, playing into Newsom's reputation as a rule-bending swell. He apologized, but cooped-up Californians were angry. In April, 2021, a petition to recall the Governor qualified for the ballot.

"Recalls are existential," DeBoo told me. "You lose an election, and there can be another election. You lose a recall, you're basically done." Newsom assembled a team to defeat the recall. Sean Clegg said, "I told him, You can be Gray Davis"—a governor who was successfully recalled, in 2003, leading to the election of Schwarzenegger—"or you can be Scott Walker." Walker made his recall a referendum on the other side. Some of the petition's signatories were Democratic voters, but its loudest advocates were conservative businesspeople who resented the lockdown, and a campaign against the recall, led by the strategist Juan Rodriguez, painted the effort as a bad-faith Republican power grab.

The recall failed by twenty-four points. It showed that nearly two-thirds of voting Californians wanted Newsom as governor. It filled his political coffers, bringing in seventy million dollars from donors. And it left him with a powerful mobilization network. (The Governor's redistricting campaign was run, in ninety days, with the recall staff and playbook. "Part of the reason we were successful is that we had an established model," Rodriguez told me.) The experience also gave Newsom a new edge. "His skin got a lot thicker," DeBoo told me. "It was a training round in big-kid politics."

Broadly speaking, there are two theories about the Democrats' best prospects going forward. Theory 1 is that the Party has reached such a crisis of inefficacy in the Trump era that most things about it—its experienced personnel, its hydraulics of strategy and power—should be sold for scrap and rebuilt from the charismatic left. Democrats wringing their hands and making appeals to process while the President sends people to Salvadoran prisons without trial are unfit to meet the moment, this theory says. The answer lies in a cohort of social-media-literate leftists less concerned with civil disagreement and bipartisanship than with calling things plainly: a more direct challenge to *MAGA*. Yes, they will have to run without the support of rich donors, major businesses, and mega-celebrities with media and skin-care brands. But Theory 1 says, Democrats don't need

'em. They can do without buckets of cash if they truly embrace affordability populism, which will let them peel off voters who drifted to Trump for cheaper milk. "A mandate for change, a mandate for a new kind of politics, a mandate for a city we can afford" is how Zohran Mamdani, who won the New York mayorship on Theory 1, summarized the approach in his victory speech. Ocasio-Cortez, another successful practitioner, spent part of last year holding rallies with Bernie Sanders in places like Tempe, Missoula, and Nampa, demonstrating that they could turn out middle-American audiences in the tens of thousands.

Theory 2 says that this is not the moment to break the liberal coalition. The number of people openly or covertly exasperated by *MAGA* is now enormous, and what's needed is a dynamic unifier who can get things done. That will entail the coöperation of finance and industry, which, weary of the current Administration's volatile economic and foreign policy, are likely to support a challenger who can steady the boat. And it will entail the collaboration of young dynamos adept at gathering excitement—a vital skill not to be mistaken for the skill of wrestling ideas into law. Isn't it better to improve the devil we know? Alliances and institutional memories are the Democrats' great advantage over a self-uprooting Republican Party. Take the advantage, Theory 2 says.

Newsom is the Democrats' current lead contender for a

Theory 2 approach—the preferred path of the Party establishment, and, not surprisingly, one around which structures and funding channels have already begun to form.

*“Son, when I was your age, I also found it remarkably comfortable to sit on the floor.”*

Cartoon by Meredith Southard

In late October, almost two weeks before the redistricting vote, Scott Wiener announced that he was running for Congress against Nancy Pelosi, whom he lauded in his announcement. Two days after the redistricting vote, Pelosi announced that she would not seek reelection, turning attention toward younger Democrats. “There’s all this potential energy just held in the plates for the Democrats if it’s *not* Biden and it’s *not* Ruth Bader Ginsburg,” a senior adviser to Newsom told me.

Many members of this rising cohort are longtime Newsomites. Some, like Simon, formed bonds with him before reaching power. Robert Garcia, now the ranking member on the House Oversight Committee, which is responsible for investigating the Trump Administration, has been a political ally ever since Newsom, then the lieutenant governor, endorsed his underdog run for Long Beach mayor. Many of them bridge left and center-left constituencies. Ammar Campa-Najjar, a Mexican Palestinian Navy reservist in contact with Newsom since 2011, has unsuccessfully run

for Congress twice against the Republican incumbents in his Southern California district but announced last fall that he would try a third time, figuring that redistricting, among other things, had improved his prospects. He told me, "If you had said in 2018 that being a Mexican Palestinian who grew up in Gaza would become an asset in today's political world, I would have said you were smoking something."

Newsom's ascent to higher office might not necessarily go unchallenged even in California, because some people believe that Kamala Harris is making moves toward another run for President. There was her declaration, in July, that she would not run for California governor—an uncanny echo of Newsom's own preëmptive refusal of the Senate seat. There is her coyness about her future plans, and her own recent memoir. And there was the conspicuous fact that, at the redistricting rally at the Los Angeles Convention Center in the run-up to Election Day, Harris did not mention Newsom once. Someone who knows both politicians well described their relationship as "careful." Newsom's best case would be for her to clear the runway early and deliver an endorsement. "If he can get her to be as smooth on her exit as possible, then there will be nobody else looking for that nomination from California—not a soul," this person said.

Newsom has a wistful side: it comes through in his memoir. He can talk about the science of the climate and the smell of

the Pacific in the same flow of thought. At the heart of his coalition-building is a belief that virulent partisanship is a messaging issue more than a political one. Wiener recalls the Governor advising him not to heed the sharpest voices in the room: "He said, 'You represent everyone, not just people who have the time to spend six hours at a hearing.' " In his own work, the Governor has sought to smooth corners, frustrating some organizers. "The fact that we have a super-majority in California and we have not passed more progressive policies has been a huge wasted opportunity," Kimi Lee, a founder of the California Working Families Party and the executive director of Bay Rising Action, an advocacy group, told me. "Because he wants to run for President, he's trying to keep everybody his friend, and in doing that he's not pushing enough."

To many eyes, Newsom's talent for compromise-brokering gives him dexterity in a fractious state. Others see a history of impure influence. At the end of Newsom's mayoral term, in January, 2011, he refused to be sworn in as lieutenant governor for a week, allowing him to appoint a new district attorney in San Francisco. D.A.s can prosecute labor, consumer, and environmental violations and other business infractions. In San Francisco, the seat has often seemed to be guarded by industry. The city's only left-wing D.A. during the past twenty years, Chesa Boudin, who created an Economic Crimes Against Workers Unit and prosecuted

DoorDash, was recalled by way of a campaign whose funders included a major DoorDash investor. Newsom appointed a moderate. Peskin, then the chairman of the city's Democratic Party, described the message to big business as "You're in good hands. Now, would you remember I'm going to run for governor in a couple of years and send me some dough?"

The question of influence has come to a head with the tech industry. Marc Benioff, the C.E.O. of Salesforce, is a godfather to one of Newsom's children. Occasionally, the Google co-founder Larry Page crashed in Newsom's living room during his early days building the company. Newsom, in his first book, "Citizenville" (2013), laid out an idealistic vision of tech entrepreneurship as a tool for better government. When I asked about perceptions of his coziness with tech power, he told me, "It's fair."

Early on, "it was just Larry and Sergey, Ev and Biz," he said. In Newsom's view, many leaders in tech abandoned their own early principles. "These folks have *changed*. Elon is a perfect example—I knew him well for years. These are not my friends anymore."

But neither are they enemies. After members of S.E.I.U.-U.H.W., a powerful health-care union, started a petition to get a one-time wealth tax on Californians worth more than a billion dollars on this year's ballot, Newsom began openly

working against the effort, saying that the proposal made no fiscal sense: in the long term, the state would collect more revenue from taxing billionaires at regular rates over time, not frightening them away with a single, enormous tax. And nothing has challenged Newsom's needle-threading more than the explosion of A.I. "There was a really profound question, which was: Who decides the future of this technology? Who decides what it's going to mean for people?" Teri Olle, the vice-president of Economic Security California, a policy-advocacy group, said. Her interest was largely in the socioeconomics of A.I.—whom it would make rich and powerful, whom it might immiserate.

The technology also posed new kinds of risks. Two years ago, after working with Olle and A.I.-safety experts, Scott Wiener introduced a regulatory bill that would require major A.I. powers to hew to predefined safety standards, undergo audits, and allow the state attorney general to hold companies liable. Olle helped rustle up support from Hollywood talent. "You had Mark Ruffalo and a whole slew of A-listers telling the Governor that they really wanted him to sign," she told me. Most major tech firms hated the bill, catching the Governor between California's two most prominent industries.

Newsom vetoed the bill. "People who I really trusted were saying, 'Hold on,' " he said. Instead, he convened a working

group to study A.I. safety, led by Jennifer Chayes, who spent twenty years as a head of core computing and A.I. labs at Microsoft; Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar, a former California Supreme Court justice, who has worked on A.I. legal questions; and Fei-Fei Li, a founder of the Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence, who is often called the Godmother of A.I. Last March, the group issued a draft of a report, which urged a shift from liability-based guardrails to a trust-but-verify standard of transparency—“the difference between *requiring* you to lower your carbon emissions and saying, ‘Tell us what your carbon emissions are,’ ” as Nathan Calvin, general counsel at the A.I.-safety organization Encode, who consulted on the bill, told me. The new framework would allow elected leaders to respond to problems through the evolving life of A.I. technology, rather than making them define terms from the start.

“We were all really pleased,” Olle admitted. Last summer, when Wiener brought forward a second bill, some companies, including OpenAI, still sought alternatives, but others, such as Anthropic, went so far as to formally endorse it, and Newsom signed it. The President has authorized the Justice Department to quash all state efforts to regulate A.I., but New York’s A.I.-safety act, signed in December, explicitly drew from California’s transparency models, and other state laws are expected to follow.

What does Gavin Newsom believe in, beyond his own political future? Proponents of the Governor point to moments like these, when he transformed fraught policy into a bridge to unite diverse interests. The corridor to his office is lined with Paul Fusco's photographs from Bobby Kennedy's funeral train, showing a varied, stricken nation assembled along the tracks. Newsom, like the postwar institutional Democrats he lionizes, sees the state as the center of the wheel of American endeavor. For Americans who share his sense of loss, not so much for a past that never was as for a future that was promised, time is running out. The children who were seven at the time of Kennedy's funeral—a year before the moon landing—will turn sixty-five this year. The students who will enter college in the fall were seven when Trump descended the golden escalator. One can hope that they will hold the thread, but to them the thread is in the realm of ghosts. This is the country they know, and the rest of it is American history.

On the second Thursday in January, Newsom delivered a State of the State address in Sacramento. He introduced a budget centered on education, from universal transitional kindergarten to summer-school funding. He pointed to a generic-drug line that the state had launched, offering patients insulin pens for eleven dollars, and described connecting more than sixty thousand homeless people with services. Tracks for the first high-speed rail in the country

were finally being laid in California. Homicide rates were the lowest they had been in L.A. since 1966, and in San Francisco since 1954. "It's time to update your talking points," he said, addressing his *MAGA* critics. He had memorized the hour-long speech within a working week.

In the run-up to the speech, the state was projected to have an eighteen-billion-dollar deficit. Newsom claimed that it was three billion through different projections, but said that prudence was in order. In the past year, many economists and bankers have warned that the United States is on unstable economic ground, meaning that whoever runs for President in 2028 may do so in the midst of a financial crisis. In his office, Newsom told me that his address was meant to look to that contingency.

"I was thinking about this notion of 'democratizing our economy to save democracy'—they're completely linked," he said. The economic woes of the average American, he believed, had led to the Democrats' defeat in 2024. "People will look for *anything* different in the absence of tangible solutions. That's why we were willing to give Trump another at-bat."

In the days leading up to the vote on Proposition 50, a redistricting measure meant to offset Texas's gerrymandering, Newsom spoke at a series of rallies before supporters, union members, and influencers. Photograph by Gabriela Bhaskar / NYT / Redux

Since becoming governor, Newsom has stationed nearly four hundred members of the National Guard statewide, focussed on the southern border. ("Trump pulled them off the border for L.A., which is the great irony," Newsom said.) The line he walks on immigration is a fine one. As governor, Newsom has coordinated with *ice* and the Department of Homeland Security on eleven thousand criminal-deportation transfers from state prisons. "That doesn't make me popular," he said. "But you can't countenance criminal behavior, period—if you're here without documentation, there's no special pass for that." For those not convicted of major crimes, however, California remains a sanctuary state, and Newsom, in his first budget, set aside money for Jewish Family Service and Catholic Charities in San Diego, which provide services to migrants who have crossed the border—an effort that eventually led to the state investing hundreds of millions of dollars in migrant centers. These two prongs, tightening border security and helping those who do arrive, are not mutually exclusive, he maintains; California has not experienced the overwhelm seen in states such as Texas, which has concentrated on policing.

Newsom said that he had warned the Biden Administration about the political stakes of not controlling the border. "I said, 'I'm getting it from Democrats everywhere. I go down in San Diego, I go down to Imperial, people are angry. You're losing your supporters,'" Newsom told me. "Whoever is the

next President, if they have control of Congress for two years, they should be out of office if they don't address this issue." During a meeting with Trump in the Oval Office last February, Newsom said, the President harped on immigration.

"I said, 'I'm with you—let's get rid of sanctuary policy,' " Newsom told me. " 'Let's do comprehensive immigration reform. It exists only because of your unwillingness, at the federal level, to actually solve the problem.' "

No one who meets with Newsom walks away without a list of policy programs that must be handled more effectively. Late last year, he assembled a team to pore over the policy platforms of candidates running for California governor this fall and to see whether there were ideas that he could take up and put into practice before the end of the year. All his political life, he said, people have been telling him to focus; all his political life, he has refused. "We don't have the luxury of that," he told me in his office. "Foster care matters, as much as child care matters, as much as prenatal care matters, as much as preschool matters, as much as preventable-disease and chronic-disease management matter, as much as—" He paused for breath. His arms were in the air, and he was almost dancing.

"Geez!" he exclaimed, as if suddenly overcome by an idea. "I wish I was running for governor again!" ♦

