

Voting for the Status Quo in California



In the midst of social chaos, the voters again pick Newsom. Here's why.

by Bruce Bawer

Here's a brief history of New York City during the last half century. Under a series of incompetent and ideology-driven mayors, it turned from a glittering jewel into a cesspool of crime, corruption, poverty, narcotics, prostitution, and homelessness. Heroically, Rudy Giuliani restored it to glory. And Bill de Blasio, mayor from 2014 to 2021, turned it back into a hovel. Last November, voters had a chance to reverse their city's alarmingly fast decline. A scandal-ridden machine Democrat, Eric Adams, who was chummy with Louis Farrakhan and who, when speaking in public, sounded like an imbecile, was running against a local hero: Curtis Sliwa, who, as founder of the non-profit Guardian Angels, a highly regarded anti-crime group consisting mostly of black and Hispanic men, began patrolling the city's unsafe subways in the 1970s. In short,

Sliwa, now a 68-year-old radio talk-show host, has spent his entire adult life exhibiting an unselfish dedication to the people of New York. So naturally New Yorkers elected Adams in a 67% to 28% landslide. And in the months since his inauguration, while the city has experienced record-breaking levels of violence, Adams could be seen partying it up with celebrities at the Met Gala, flying to Los Angeles to attend a lavish, star-studded dinner, and turning to hapless Chicago mayor Lori Lightfoot, of all people, for advice on fighting crime.

If I'm ruminating all these months later on the election of this buffoon as mayor of New York, it's because the voters of California have now served up a similar heartbreak. The Golden State, of course, is in very much the same boat as New York: the parks and streets of its once storied cities are full of tents, human feces, used condoms and syringes; as the state fills up with illegal aliens, the middle class flees to Texas and elsewhere. Yet last September, Governor Gavin Newsom, the empty suit who's responsible for this nightmare, and who became world-famous for violating his own stringent lockdown rules by attending a party at the French Laundry in the Napa Valley (\$350 a head for dinner), fought back a recall effort with 62% of the vote. The man who wanted to replace him, the brilliant and deeply principled Larry Elder, later wrote a [piece](#) for FrontPage about an encounter at a West L.A. restaurant with two women who'd pulled the lever for Newsom. He asked them about their views on crime, homelessness, schools, etc. On every issue, they turned out to be on the same page as Elder. But they'd voted for Newsom. Why? He told them why: they simply couldn't bring themselves to vote Republican. They admitted he was right.

In the primary elections on June 7, Californians had another chance to ditch Newsom. This time around, in a system whereby the top two vote-getters in the primary face off in the general, he was up against an obscure Republican and a high-

profile independent, Michael Shellenberger. A long-term Democrat, Shellenberg has the kind of credentials that coastal Californians love: after spending a high-school year in Nicaragua in solidarity with the Sandinistas, he studied Peace and Global Studies in college, became a radical left-wing activist, and was named a “Hero of the Environment” by *Time* Magazine. Recently, however, he’s made enemies on the left by criticizing sustainable development and “environmental alarmism.” And in *San Fransicko: How Progressives Ruin Cities*, which I [reviewed](#) in November, he takes aim at the left’s “pity narrative” on homelessness and its favorite approach to the problem, a policy called Housing First, whereby cities hand out free apartments on the assumption that the root cause of homelessness is financial difficulty. In fact, as Shellenberger discovered, homelessness is almost always caused by a combination of medical ailments, psychiatric disorders, and (above all) substance abuse – a trifecta of problems that can’t be solved by giving out apartments. What to do, then? After studying approaches around the world, Shellenberger recommends housing homeless people in temporary shelters on the condition that they submit to the treatments they need. As he shows, it works in the über-liberal city of Amsterdam, which you’d think would make Californians eager to give Shellenberger a try.

Nope. In the gubernatorial primary, with 49% of the ballots counted, Newsom won 56.3% of the vote, GOP nominee Brian Dahle, a farmer and state senator, received 16.8%, and Shellenberger got a measly 3.7%. What happened? The same thing that happened in the New York mayoral race. To explain it, it’s useful to glance at a May 15 op-ed for the *San Francisco Chronicle* by Zachary Siegel, identified as “a freelance journalist who covers public health and drug policy.” Writing with the objective of warning voters against Shellenberger, Siegel [provided](#) a perfect account of just how a typical progressive mind responds to someone like Shellenberger. To wit: Shellenberger was a “zealot” who lacked “awful human

emotions like empathy and compassion” and whose “facile” and “glib” analysis of homelessness led to “cruel and harsh solutions” that blamed people’s difficulties on “bad life choices” and sought to cure them with “a hefty spoonful of tough love, tough policing and personal responsibility,” thereby appealing to “reactionary anger among an aggrieved electorate.” For a self-respecting California progressive, of course, it’s sheer barbarism to blame problems like homelessness even partly on individuals rather than on society – let alone to expect those individuals to take on a degree of responsibility for improving their own situation. As far as Siegel was concerned, Shellenberger’s plan for shelters and treatment – which, again, is based on the successful approach taken by Amsterdam – amounted to “a bizarre Big Brother-style structure of mass institutionalization” whereby the state would “round up the unhoused and coerce them into a system of shelters and ‘treatment.’”

Bottom line: if you were even considering casting your vote for Shellenberger, then you, like him, were lacking in “empathy and compassion.” In at least some parts of California, that’s what Election Day is all about. Yes, the rest of the year, you can gripe as much as you like about the state’s continued failure to solve its ever-growing crime and education and addiction and homelessness problems, about how your taxes are skyrocketing while your standard of living is taking a dive, and about the way in which the barbarians keep pouring in even as civilization collapses all around you. But on Election Day, in spite of all this, and in spite of the specifics of policy analysis and the statistics that indicate which approaches work and which don’t, you head for your polling place – on the way stepping carefully, of course, around the people sleeping on the sidewalk and over the mounds of human excrement and used needles and assorted garbage – and pull the lever for the Democrat, thereby demonstrating that, in spite of every temptation to cross over to the dark side, you’re still on the side of good. Because, remember:

it's *not* about actually fixing problems. It's about proving, in the midst of the maelstrom, that you still *care*.

First published in [*Frontpage*](#).