



Summer 1979

California Water, A New Political Economy, by Merrill R. Goodall, John D. Sullivan, and Timothy de Young

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Recommended Citation

Gary Weatherford, *California Water, A New Political Economy*, by Merrill R. Goodall, John D. Sullivan, and Timothy de Young, 19 Nat. Resources J. 756 (1979).

Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol19/iss3/20>

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CALIFORNIA WATER, A NEW POLITICAL ECONOMY

MERRILL R. GOODALL, JOHN D. SULLIVAN & TIMOTHY DE YOUNG

Montclair and New York: Allanheld Osmun/Universe Books.

1978. Pp. 117 \$18.00.

California is fertile ground for special districts, including the 900-plus districts which provide water utility services. When classified in terms of enabling legislation there are twenty types of water districts in the state. The authors use correlation analysis of numerous variables (e.g., debt, revenues, sales, acreage, expenditures, voting) to examine and compare the historical evolution, geographical distribution, governing structure, landholding patterns and financial performance of several of these district types. Most of the data for the book came from the annual reports which districts file with the State Controller. The authors acknowledge that the content and degree of self-disclosure in such reports vary, limiting to some extent the quality and data and range of variables used to characterize the districts.

Particular attention is given to comparing so-called "property qualification" districts, in which voting is weighted according to the amount of property owned, and "one-man-one vote" districts, in which property ownership is not a prerequisite for voting. In the last three decades "property qualification" districts have come to compose more than one-fourth of the total water districts in California.

Since 1950 . . . the vast majority of new districts have been incorporated in southern California and in the San Joaquin Valley. Most of the new districts were located in water-deficit areas. And . . . the more recently incorporated districts tend toward the assumption of general governmental responsibilities, toward a restricted franchise (with property ownership increasingly the basis for both district formation and for voting at bond and governing body elections), and toward urban and combined urban-irrigated uses (with no more than a few exclusively irrigation-use districts being established in recent decades). *** Half a century ago most of the districts were tied closely to agrarian purpose and were located primarily in northern California. Voting for representatives on governing bodies was, in the main, open to registered, resident electors. The newer districts, formed in the southern regions of the state, differ markedly in purpose and in governing style from those formed earlier in the north (pp. 12-13).

Samples of voter turnout indicate "greater voter participation and more competitive policies" in the one person/one vote districts (p. 18).

In some property-test districts a clear majority of the votes cast is at the disposal of no more than four or five landowners; Westlands is such a district. In others, a single owner can cast the majority of all votes; Tulare Lake Basin Water Storage District in the large-scale farming areas of the southern San Joaquin Valley, and the Irvine Ranch Water District in once agriculture but now rapidly urbanizing Orange County are examples (p. 21).

Goodall and his associates examine the fiscal performance of some of the districts, finding that the property-test districts go into debt to generate revenue and the one person/one vote districts do not. The authors found that the property-test districts disclosed "relatively erratic financial behavior," while the popular vote districts exhibited "comparatively stable patterns of performance" (p. 94). The significance of such a finding is disputable, because older irrigation districts with less expensive facilities should be expected to have their debt experience behind them, whereas newer districts, installing highly mechanized water distribution systems, are incurring large increments of debt.

The authors conclude that, while family farms and corporate farms co-exist in California, it is the corporate farm, spurred by property-weighted enabling legislation, which represents the "new political economy" for California water. Carey McWilliams sounded a similar theme in *California: The Great Exception* (1949): "[California] is the one state in the Union in which the American farm tradition has never existed, except in a most limited and never fully realized manner" (p. 100). *California Water* provides modern and statistical evidence of the factory farm disposition which has characterized much of California's agriculture from the period of the Spanish ranchos onward. It cracks the door on a long-neglected subject—the role played by water districts in the settlement and development of California land.

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