

# Book Review: California Greenin': How the Golden State Became an Environmental Leader by David Vogel

**California Greenin': How the Golden State Became an Environmental Leader** presents a political history of California's environmental leadership. **David Vogel** carefully details how citizen mobilisation, business support and regulatory capacity have iteratively enabled progressive reforms. This is a fascinating case study in its own right, but it also provides broader insights about progressive policy change – both methodologically and substantively, as **Alice Evans** explains.

**California Greenin': How the Golden State Became an Environmental Leader.** David Vogel. Princeton University Press. 2018.

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Recoiling from our screens – battered and bruised by news of compounding horrors – we realise this is not a drill. We urgently need to tackle climate change, brutal xenophobia, resurgent authoritarianism and gutting austerity. Many of us are protesting, marching, publicly demonstrating widespread resistance. But is this actually enough to shift governments' priorities? My research on social movements certainly inclined me to think so. Yet David Vogel's new book, *California Greenin'*, makes me rethink that prior.

Scrambling for solutions, an overarching question emerges: what drives progressive policy change? Methodologically, Vogel takes a three-fold approach in his book. First, learn from positive deviance: study places that have made improvements, and ascertain the causes of those effects. But rather than examine one particular instance of positive deviance, Vogel pushes us to think long term (c. 150 years). This makes sense. State capacities, modes of governance, industry strength, alliances and public expectations are all cumulatively strengthened (or undermined). These contextual factors enable (or constrain) particular reforms. Attending to the *longue durée* also enables us to see recurring patterns. This enhances analytical rigour, as does comparative analysis, across policy domains. With this justification, Vogel explores the causes of positive deviance over the long term and comparatively. I'd love to see more research of this ilk.

Vogel's positive deviant is California's environmental leadership. No other US state has enacted so many innovative, comprehensive and stringent environmental regulations. These include: protecting Yosemite Valley (1864); curbing hydraulic gold mining (1884); regulating logging (1884); controlling pollution (1947); buttressing enforcement (1940s-1960s); enacting the world's first emissions standards (1964); establishing the US's first coastal protection agency (1969); introducing energy efficiency standards for appliances and buildings (1977, 1979); incentivising conservation (1982); restricting tailpipe emissions (2002); adopting legally binding emissions targets (2006); and then buttressing this mandate (2016). By 2016, California's greenhouse gas emissions had receded to below their 1990 levels. So, what explains this success?

Answer: citizen mobilisation, business support and regulatory capacity.

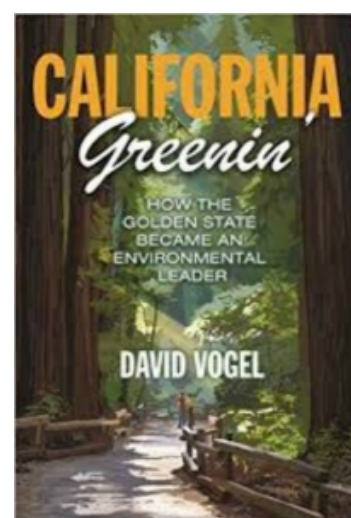




Image Credit: Dillon Wind Power Project, Palm Springs, Riverside County, California ([Tony Webster CC BY 2.0](#))

Californian residents have long pushed for environmental regulation to protect their backyards. They live in close proximity to towering mountains, mesmerising waterfalls, ancient sequoias and sun-kissed sandy beaches. California living can be glorious, if natural beauties are preserved. Given this geography, the benefits of environmental protection are highly visible, as are the threats. Residents witnessed coastline erosion, were horrified by blackening oil spills and coughed through the smog. So, this is partly about glaring self-interest.

But identities and aspirations are also forged historically. Yes, activism often emerged in response to local threats (coastal drilling in Southern California, smog in Los Angeles and Bay Area felling). Yet this succession of activism and policy reform incrementally expanded residents' circles of concern, galvanising state-wide support for action on global climate change. Safeguarding (rather than destroying) the wilderness also enabled a broad range of outdoor pursuits: hiking, biking, surfing, kayaking, rafting, camping. As Californians became wealthier and more mobile, enjoyment and support for such activities expanded. Activism, environmental protection and rising standards of living thus cultivated a core image of healthy living and environmentalism in California.

The staunchest opposition has come from business (especially the oil and automotive industries). But here's the surprise: many businesses have actually lobbied *for* environmental regulation. Railroads wanted the giant sequoias protected to attract nature tourism; farmers contested hydraulic gold mining to protect the fertile Sacramento Valley; real estate developers opposed coastline drilling to protect the beautiful beaches and preserve house prices. This enabled feedback effects: expanding economic opportunities and green lobbying. Agriculture, tourism, real estate and clean tech flourished because they were protected by environmental regulation, and then allied with environmental organisations to lobby for more stringent measures.

California's history thus suggests that environmental legislation is likely to be stronger and more effective when it benefits (and is championed by) influential business. Outside California, the converse occurs: the dearth of environmental regulation suffocates green industries, curtailing their policy influence.

Vogel's overarching message is that citizens and businesses mobilise for progressive reforms when there are strong, potential, *visible* gains. But people will only believe in the efficacy of regulation if they have faith in state capacity. Such beliefs are developed through observation. By seeing the state successfully control harmful air pollutants, Californians gained confidence in its capacity to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. California's positive deviance is thus not only a function of self-interest, but also a belief in state capacity. These interests and beliefs are iteratively developed over the *longue durée* – as Vogel comprehensively demonstrates.

Public administrative capacity is cardinal. The Government of California created regulatory agencies, invested in research and enabled a policy laboratory. Successive experimentation and innovation became widely recognised and revered. This, combined with the size of California's market, led to the 'California effect' (Vogel's now-famous term). Other jurisdictions adopted California's higher environmental standards. Seeing others follow suit abates Californians' concerns about free-riding, and encourages further environmental action.

In sum, Vogel presents three key drivers of environmental regulation: citizen mobilisation, business support and (faith in) state capacity. This is persuasively demonstrated through a long-term and sectorally comparative study of positive deviance, understanding the causes of effects. It is a truly fabulous book, one of the best I've read this year. (Though personally, I'd like a little more on subjectivities: people's beliefs, identities, perceptions and how they evolved over time, in response to successive mobilisation and regulation.)

What can we learn from 'California Greenin''? Yes, mobilise; yes, strengthen state capacity; but also collaborate with influential businesses that benefit from reforms. Perhaps these principles could strengthen other social movements, besides environmentalism? Take immigration, for instance. Many industries (especially health, social care, construction and technology) hugely benefit from internationally diverse workforces. How might we best support and unlock this potentially powerful lever? Might campaigning organisations (like Oxfam and Amnesty) collaborate with their corporate partners to [lobby](#) for more progressive policies?

Vogel's political history of California indicates that business could be the missing link...

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*