THE CALIFORNIA LEGISLATURE:

SOME FACTS AND FIGURES

by

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INTRODUCTION

The following pages provide a statistical profile of California's state legislature. The data are intended to suggest who constitutes California's assembly and senate, how long they have held office, and what sort of challenges they face when the state's voters go to the polls. By examining the legislature over a span of three decades, from 1960 to the present, this profile aims to illustrate both continuity and change in the ways that California's legislative body represents its constituency.

Numbers, not to mention graphs and charts, do not speak for themselves. To be of value to persons interested in learning about the California state legislature, the data that follows require some explanation. The information relates to three distinct yet interdependent aspects of the state legislature: (1) the background of the men and women who constitute the assembly and senate; (2) a characterization of competitiveness in the elections that place them in office; and (3) some facts about voter representation based upon the growing population of assembly and senate districts in the state. The data regarding each of these three areas require general and, in some cases, technical explanation to clarify the stories that the numbers and graphs tell. To this task we now turn.

The statistical representation of the California state legislature on the first page is essentially self-explanatory.[1] In both the assembly and the senate, two general trends from 1960 to the present are worth noting.

First, the average number of years of service in both the assembly and the senate is rising. Those who hold office are continuing to hold it for longer than in the past. This trend is even more pronounced among Democrat legislators, who enjoy the privilege of being in majority positions in both branches of California's legislature. The two graphs on the second page provide a visual summary of this trend in both the assembly and the senate. To be sure, as some current articles have pointed out,[2] most legislators still serve less than ten years before moving on. However, as the graphs illustrate, the figure has not always been so high. The number of senators and assembly persons in California serving from ten to eighteen years has risen considerably from 1961 to 1988; conversely, the number of legislators with fewer than nine years' tenure has decreased over that time period.

A second trend suggested by the background data is the increasing professionalization of the legislature. More and more office-holders acknowledge themselves as full-time legislators -- politics is their profession. For example, in the senate the number of self-proclaimed full-time legislators has increased from one to sixteen over the past three decades. Similarly, the assembly has witnessed a gain of thirty full-time assembly persons, rising from four to thirty-four. Further, an increasing number of these people have utilized positions as administrative aides and staff to other legislators as points of entry to holding a legislative seat. Compare the assembly in 1961 when one member had experience as legislative staff with the 1988 body having thirteen such members. The noteworthy increase suggests the increasing professionalization of the legislative body.

More complicated, but perhaps more revealing as well, are the graphs representing competition and marginality in the election of California's legislators. Marginality is a concept that refers to the margin of victory in either an assembly or senate district election. A "marginal" district or victory is one in which the elected legislator defeated the challenger by five percent of the vote or less. Thus, marginal elections are "competitive"; the ballot result could not be forecast without some doubt.

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1 The data on this page are from the California Legislature Handbook for each of the respective years, as published by the California senate and assembly.

2 See, for example, "Limiting Legislators' Terms Has Its Price," in The Sacramento Bee, 1 July 1990, A3.

In contrast, a margin of victory of eleven percent or greater indicates a sound victory, probably predictable beforehand without too much doubt. The graph on page three provides an overview of marginality in California legislative elections.[3] The two graphs, and particularly the one representing the senate, reveal an almost fifty percent reduction in the number of marginal elections.

In the pages that follow a more technical examination of marginality and competitiveness in state legislative elections is provided. These graphs -- based on David Mayhew's argument[4] -- provide a complete picture of declining marginality in the election of California's assembly persons and senators. While the graphs break down the results to show which party, Democrat or Republican, emerged victorious, the focus of the graphs is upon the margin of victory.

The fourth page provides two ideal-type graphs based on dummy figures. The upper graph shows how the results of a competitive election might appear. The majority of the districts are competitive, with margins of victory less than five percent, and, as such, group towards the center of the graph.[5] This trend makes the overall shape of the graph peaked, with its center nested around the marginal districts. In contrast, the lower graph represents an election lacking in competition. The majority of the districts tend towards the edges of the graph, where victory is by a margin of greater than eleven percent or uncontested. Few of the districts are represented by the striped, marginal columns.

To summarize, in a competitive election, the weight of the graph will be in the center, clustered around the competitive, marginal districts. In contrast, elections lacking in competition will be recognized by a shift of weight towards the edges of the graph, where victory is by eleven percent or more.

The first thing one notices when turning to the graphs representing marginality in the California assembly and senate is that even as far back as 1960, few districts were won by marginal decisions. While one might thus be tempted to conclude that Mayhew's argument regarding marginality in national congressional elections is not portable to the California state level, a closer examination of the graphs reveals the inadequacy of such a position. The graphs do, in fact, depict a decrease in marginal elections. Consider, for example, the difference between the distribution of districts in the 1960 and 1988 assemblies. In 1960 the weight of the graph is fairly evenly distributed across the range of columns with the exception of Democrat victories exceeding eleven percent. By 1988, the weight of the graphs has shifted entirely to the edges; both Republican and Democratic candidates are winning districts by large, less than competitive margins. The center -- representing competitive elections -- no longer holds.

The graphs detailing marginality in senatorial elections tell a similar story. From 1960 to 1988 the trend is away from closely contested districts towards increasing margins of victory, regardless of party registration.

While some observers of the decreasing tendency towards marginal districts have suggested that the numbers reflect constituents' satisfaction with and approval of the performances of their elected officials, others have argued that the decrease in marginal elections is inversely proportional to the increase in benefits of incumbency for legislators. The privileges of franking and widespread recognition afforded the incumbent have been widely cited as sources of decreasing marginality.[6]

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3 These data are taken from the election results issue of The California Journal, published in December of each election year.

4 "Congressional Elections: The Case of the Vanishing Marginals," in *Polity*, (1974) vol. 6, no. 3.

5 Marginal districts -- those in which victory is by less than five percent of the vote -- are highlighted on the graphs by striped as opposed to solid columns.

6 See the collection of discussions in Studies of Congress, edited by Glenn R. Parker, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1985, pp. 3-69. This collection also contains a reprint of Mayhew's article.

The data comparing marginality in all districts with marginality in "open" districts where the incumbent does not run for re-election suggest the cogency of these arguments when applied to the California state legislature. The seventh page, entitled "Comparison of Marginality in Open and Incumbent-Contested Districts," reflects the role of incumbency in decreasing the incidence of marginal elections. The effects of incumbency are portrayed by comparing the percentage of marginal elections in all assembly and senate districts with the percentage of marginal elections in assembly and senate districts that were "open," where the incumbent office holder did not seek re-election.

The data for both the assembly and the senate show that the percentage of marginal elections in open districts tends to run about thirty-three percent. In contrast, that figure seldom is greater than twenty percent in incumbent-contested districts. As a glance at the 1988 figures reveals, the influence exerted by incumbency on competitive elections is increasing. In the assembly, open districts foster a twenty-four percent increase in the number of competitive districts. The comparable number for the senate in 1988 is a robust forty percent increase in the number of competitive districts. The conclusion is clear: incumbency, as it is constituted presently, negatively impacts the competitiveness of California state legislature elections.

The third and final section provides facts on the size of California's legislature in comparison to the state's growing population.[7] The analysis is extended to the national level, by comparing the average number of citizens per assembly and senate district in California with the respective figures for the other forty-nine states. Whereas the population of California has grown dramatically since the turn of the century, the size of the legislature representing Californians has not changed since 1900. As the tables indicate, a senator taking office today is expected to represent an average of 750,000 constituents, nearly three times as great as the constituency a senator in 1950 was expected to represent.

The following two pages put the issue in a comparative perspective. California's assembly persons and senators are called upon to represent much larger districts than their counterparts in other states. With the exception of Texas, the population size of California's assembly and senate districts dwarfs those of the other states. Given these figures, it may not be surprising that some observers of the California state legislature have called for an increase in its size in order to enable the legislative body to better represent its constituents.

To conclude: The facts, figures, and graphs included in these pages are not intended to point towards any single position or line of action. Indeed, the data in these pages will be relevant to a number of varied initiatives to be voted upon in the upcoming election. The issues of term limitations, office-holding privileges, and redistricting, for example, will certainly be prominent as November approaches. It has been the aim of this paper to inform these issues by taking a broad look at the development of California's legislature over time.

Andrew L. Roth
September, 1990.

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7 The source for these data is The Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1988 (108 Edition), U.S. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.

STATISTICAL REPRESENTATION OF THE CALIFORNIA STATE LEGISLATURE

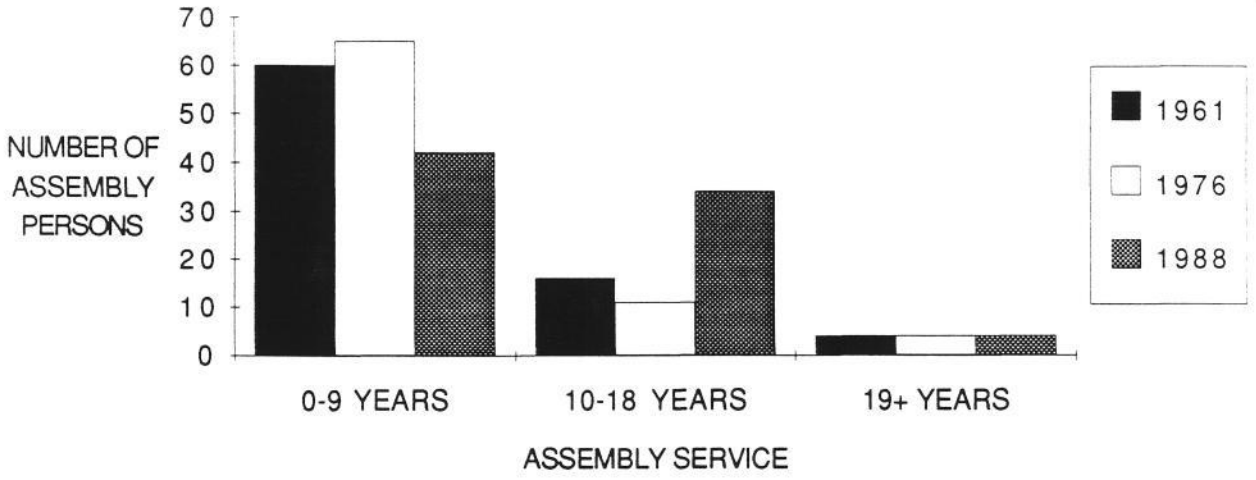
Assembly

	1961	1976	1988
Party Representation			
Democrat	47	55	48
Republican	33	25	32
Average Number of Years of Assembly Service			
Democrat	7.7	5.8	12.5
Republican	6.6	8.2	7.7
Assembly Persons with Previous Legislative Experience			
Mayor and/or City Council	12	13	17
Administrative Assistant/Staff	1	5	13
Occupations of Assembly Persons			
Full-Time Legislator	4	24	34
Attorney	23	25	14
Small Business	15	8	4
Farmer/Rancher	6	5	4
Teacher/Educator	6	10	5
Other Occupation	26	8	19

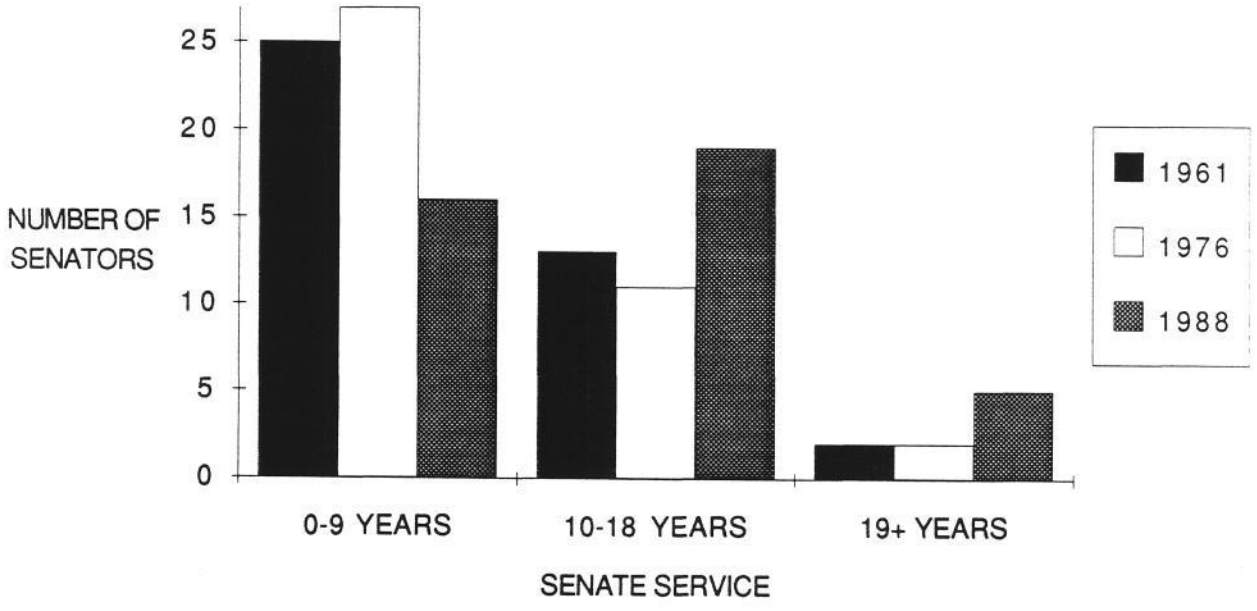
Senate

	1961	1976	1988
Party Representation			
Democrat	29	24	24
Republican	11	16	16
Average Number of Years of Senate Service			
Democrat	9.0	9.8	12.6
Republican	6.9	11.3	7.9
Senators with Previous Legislative Experience			
Assembly	9	19	20
Mayor and/or City Council	2	6	7
Staff	0	1	2
Occupations of Senators			
Full-Time Legislator	1	10	16
Attorney	16	16	10
Small Business	6	3	1
Farmer/Rancher	5	2	4
Teacher/Educator	1	2	3
Other Occupation	11	7	7

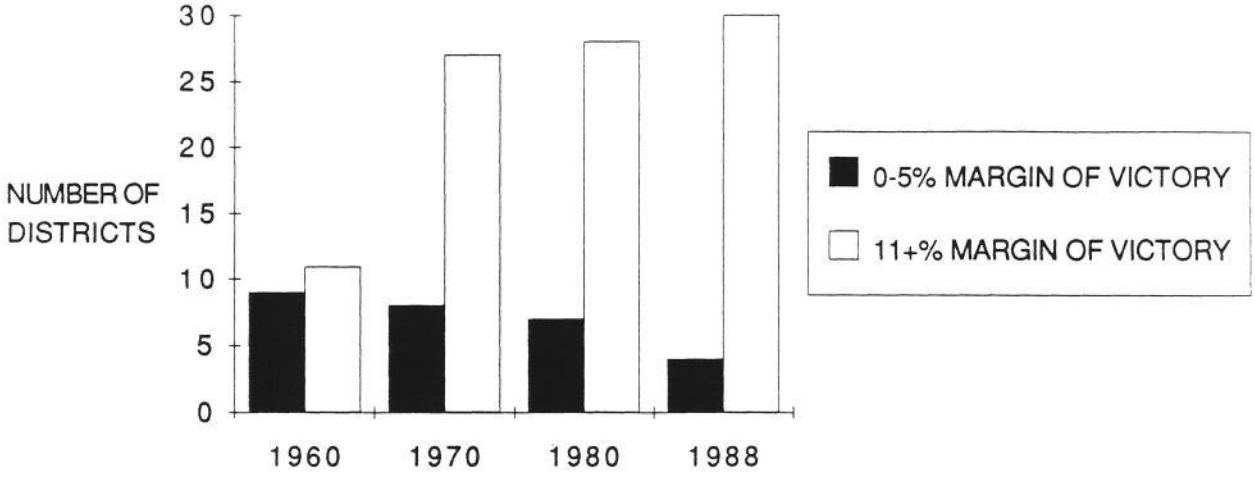
INCREASING LENGTH OF SERVICE
CALIFORNIA STATE ASSEMBLY



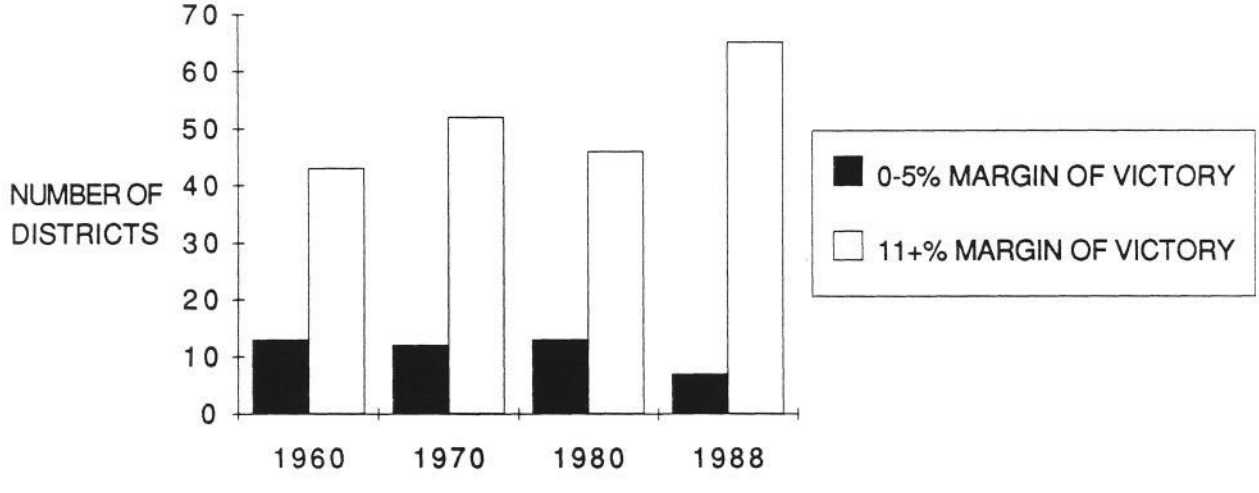
INCREASING LENGTH OF SERVICE
CALIFORNIA STATE SENATE



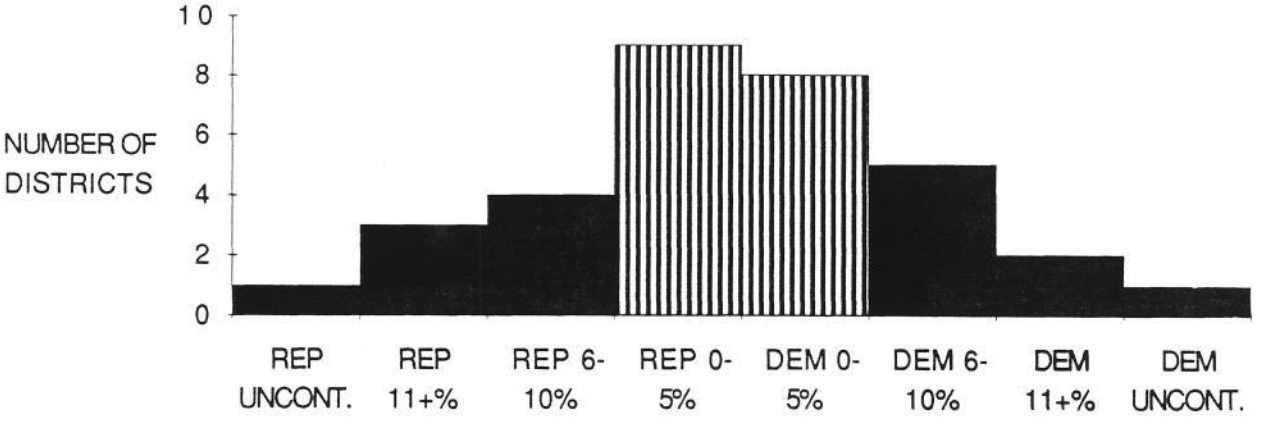
MARGINALITY AND COMPETITIVENESS IN CALIFORNIA STATE SENATE ELECTIONS, 1960-1988



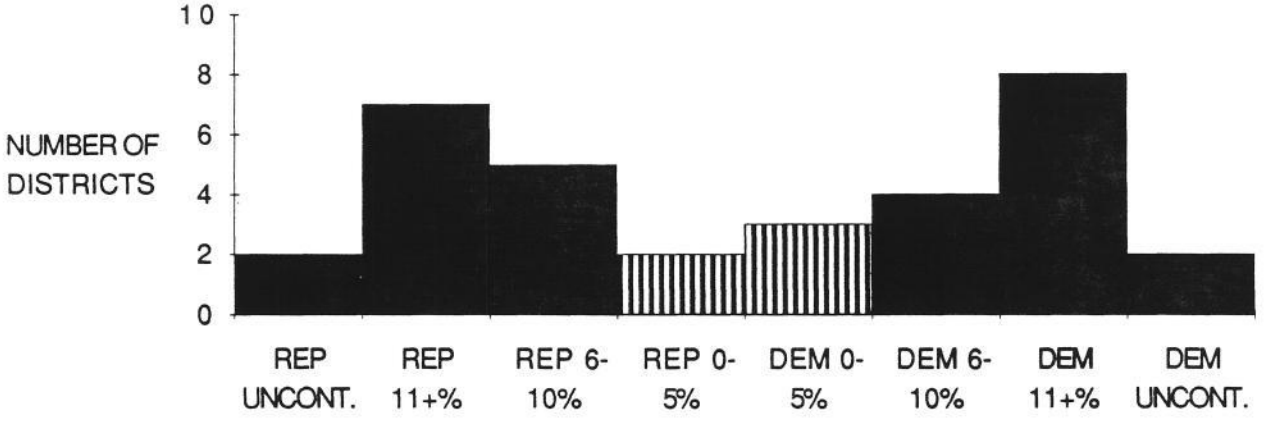
MARGINALITY AND COMPETITIVENESS IN CALIFORNIA STATE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS, 1960-1988



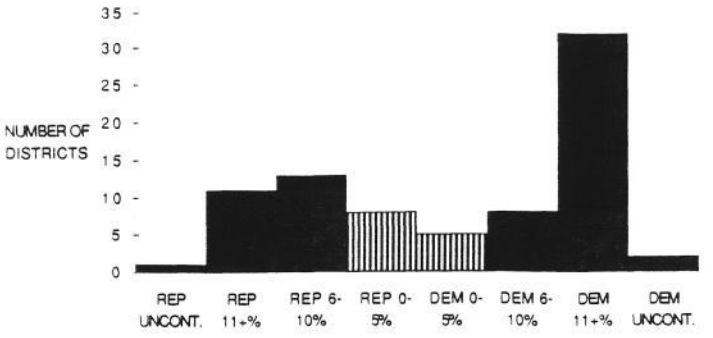
COMPETITIVE ELECTION WITH MAJORITY OF THE DISTRICTS DECIDED BY MARGINAL RESULTS



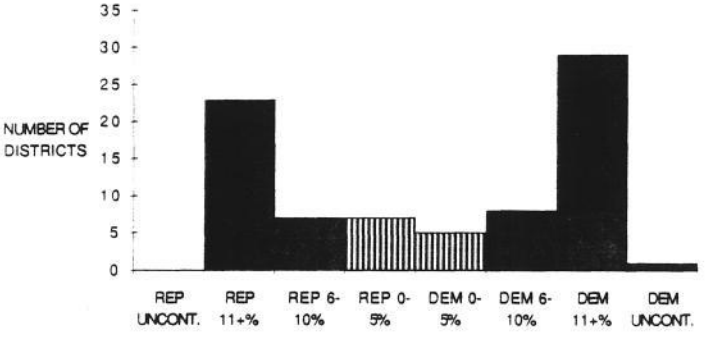
NON-COMPETITIVE ELECTION WITH FEW DISTRICTS DECIDED BY MARGINAL RESULTS



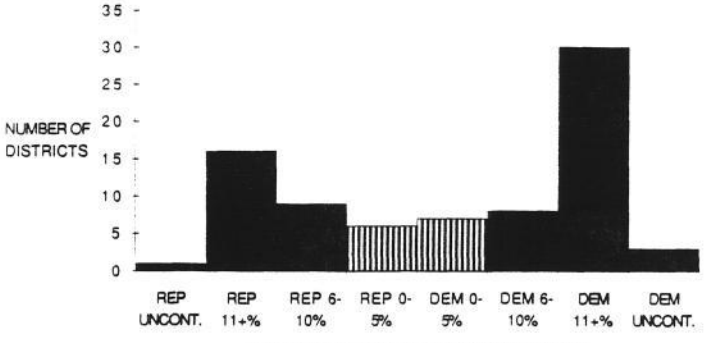
1960 ASSEMBLY



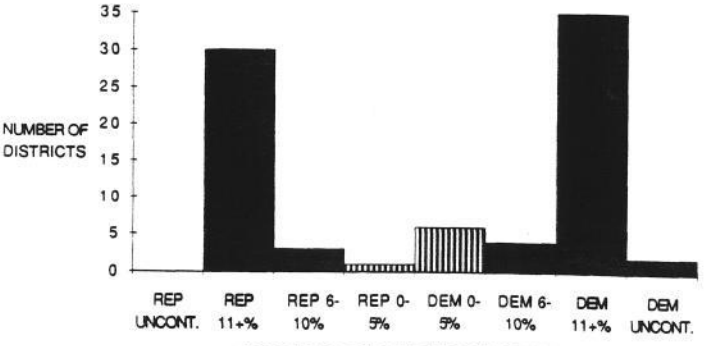
1970 ASSEMBLY



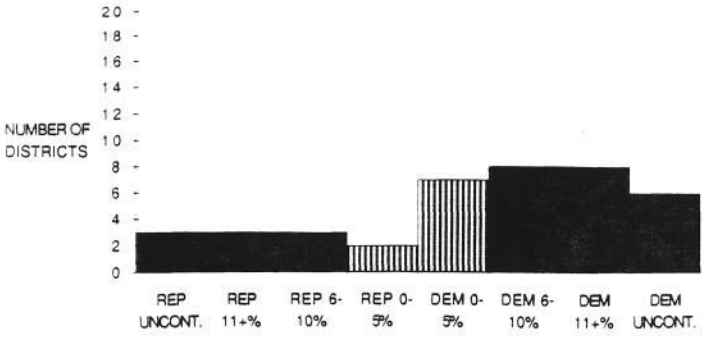
1980 ASSEMBLY



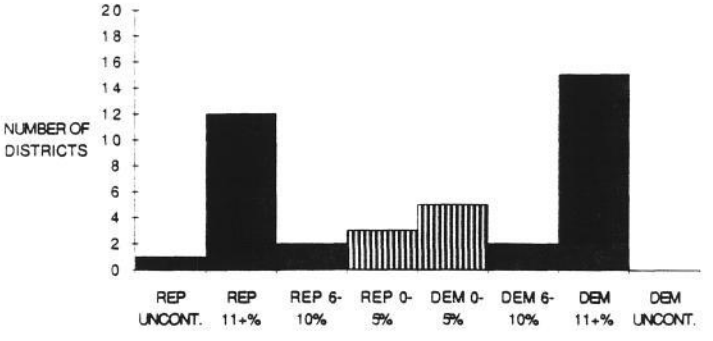
1988 ASSEMBLY



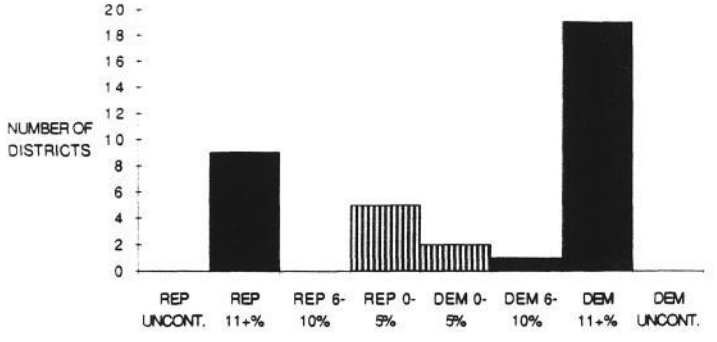
1960 SENATE



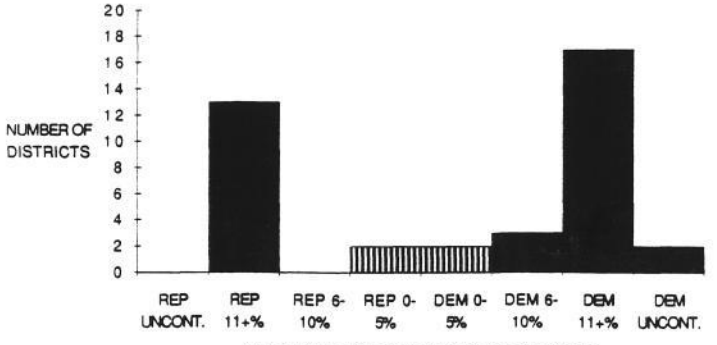
1970 SENATE



1980 SENATE



1988 SENATE



COMPARISON OF MARGINALITY IN OPEN AND INCUMBENT-CONTESTED DISTRICTS 1960-1990

ASSEMBLY
(80 districts)

	1960	1970	1980	1988
Total Number of Marginal Elections	13	12	13	7
Number of "Open" Districts	11	6	15	3
Number of Marginal Elections in "Open" Districts	4	2	5	1
Percentage of Marginal Elections, All Districts	16	15	16	9
Percentage of Marginal Elections, "Open" Districts	36	33	33	33

SENATE
(40 districts)

	1960	1970	1980	1988
Total Number of Marginal Elections	9	8	7	4
Number of "Open" Districts	3	3	8	4
Number of Marginal Elections in "Open" Districts	0	3	3	2
Percentage of Marginal Elections, All Districts	23	20	18	10
Percentage of Marginal Elections, "Open" Districts	0	100	38	50

FACT SHEET

SIZE OF THE CALIFORNIA STATE LEGISLATURE IN RELATION TO STATE POPULATION

Year	Legislature	Population	Pop./Legislator
1849	48	93,000	1,938
1900	120	1,485,000	12,375
1950	120	10,586,000	88,217
1980	120	23,668,000	197,233
1990	120	30,000,000	250,000

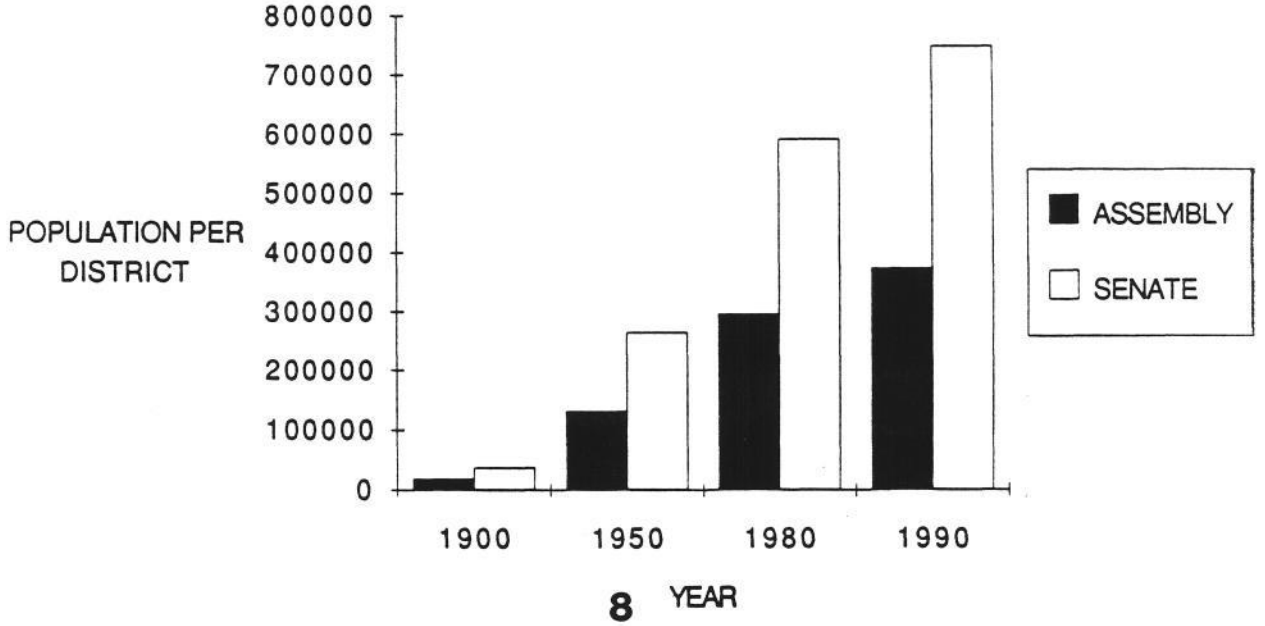
AVERAGE SIZE OF THE CALIFORNIA STATE ASSEMBLY DISTICTS BY POPULATION

Year	Assembly	Population	Pop./Assembly District
1849	36	93,000	2,583
1900	80	1,485,000	18,563
1950	80	10,586,000	132,325
1980	80	23,668,000	295,850
1990	80	30,000,000	375,000

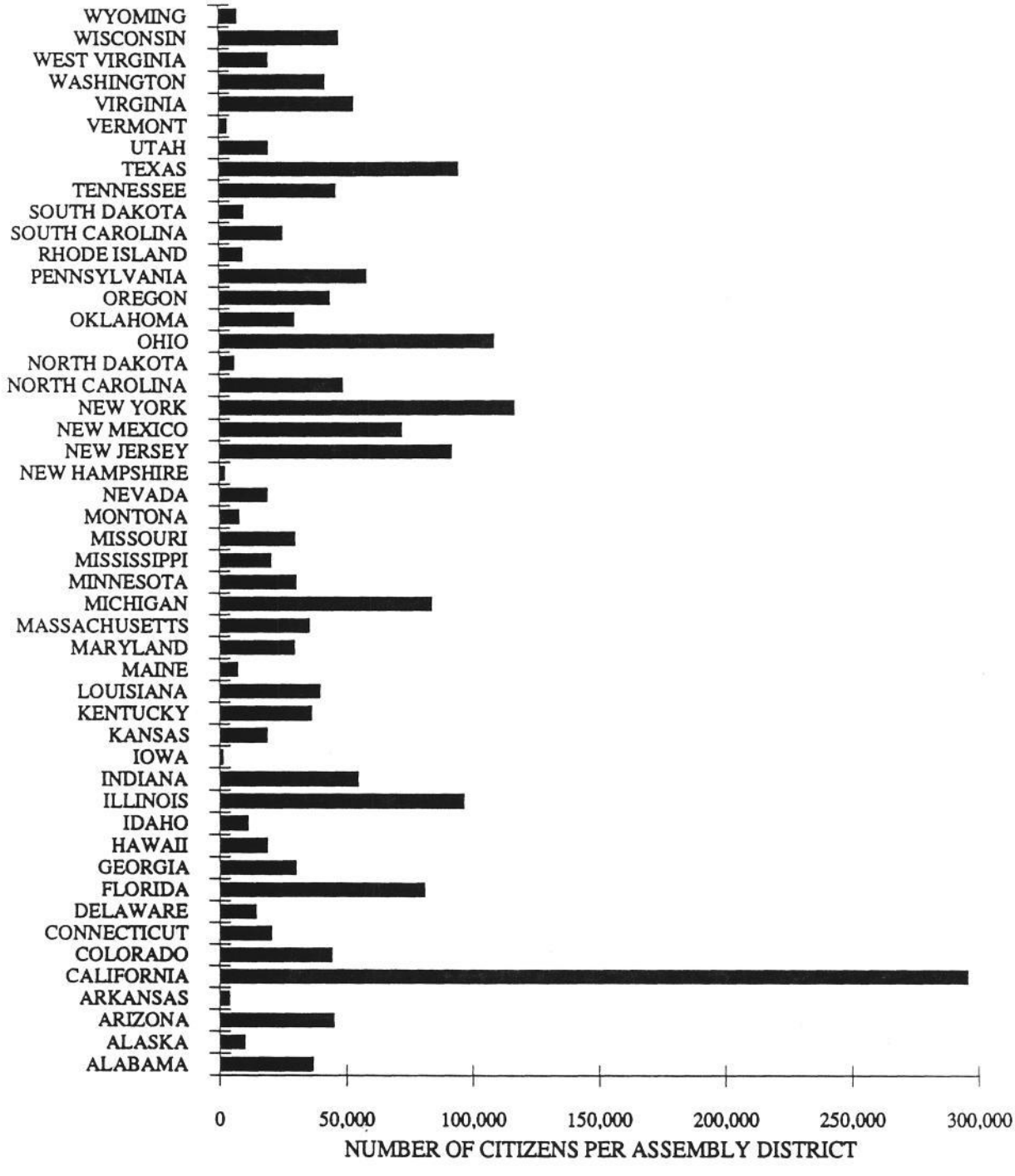
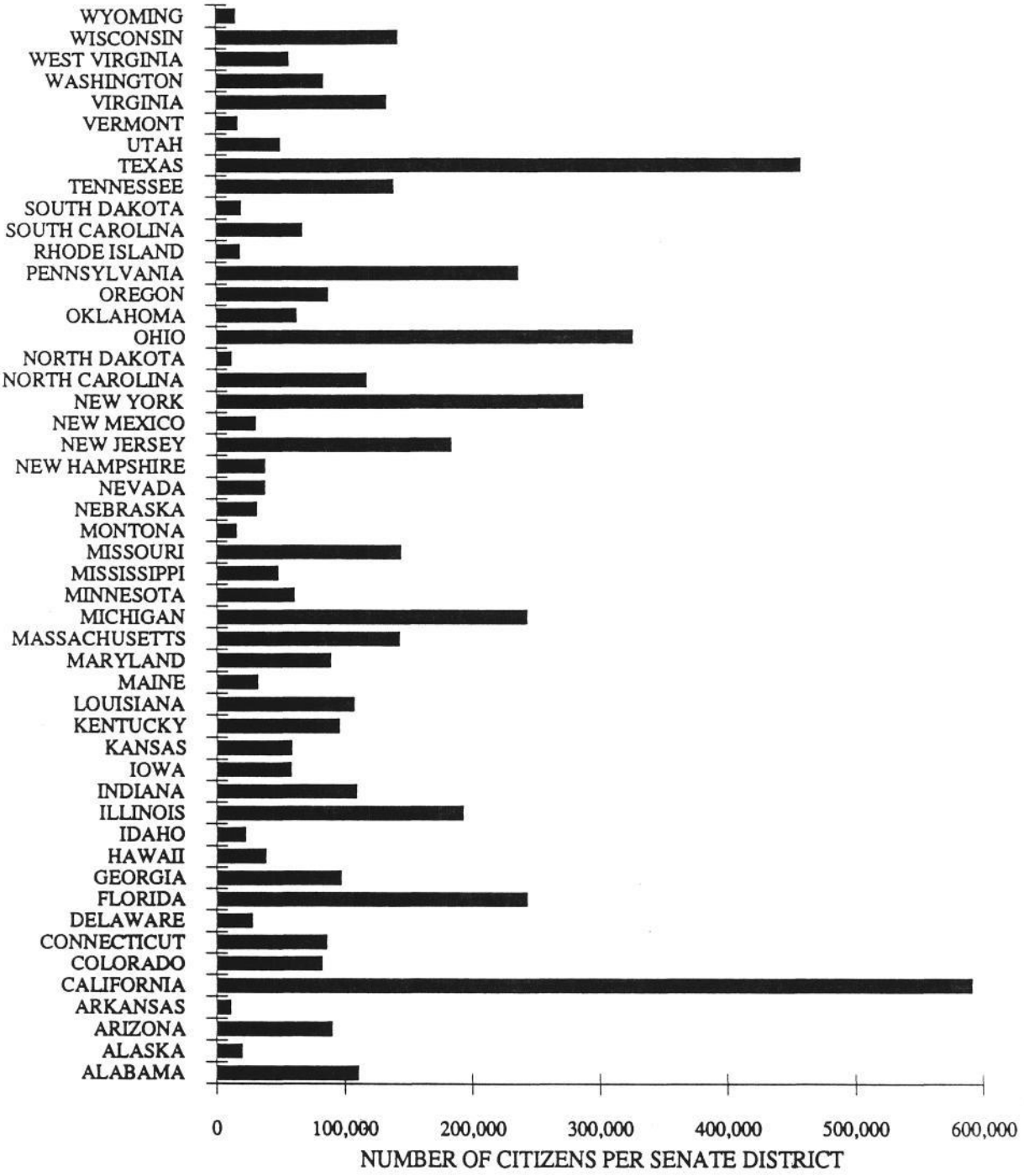
AVERAGE SIZE OF THE CALIFORNIA STATE SENATE DISTRICTS BY POPULATION

Year	Senate	Population	Pop./Senate District
1849	16	93,000	5,813
1900	40	1,485,000	37,125
1950	40	10,586,000	264,650
1980	40	23,668,000	591,700
1990	40	30,000,000	750,000

SIZE OF CALIFORNIA STATE LEGISLATURE DISTRICTS IN RELATION TO STATE POPULATION



NUMBER OF CITIZENS PER ASSEMBLY DISTRICT BY STATE
(1980 Census Data, 1986 Assembly Districts)



NUMBER OF CITIZENS PER SENATE DISTRICT BY STATE
(1980 Census Data, 1986 Senate Districts)