

# Opinion: Is Calif. an incubator or a bubble?

By Joe Mathews

California, are you an incubator for great ideas—or a bubble that shuts them out?

That's the question Californians must ask as we confront big challenges, from climate change to our housing shortage to the threats from the Trump administration. The bubble-or-incubator question is also the best way to understand the fights being waged in the legislature this summer.



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The debate over the recent extension of California's cap-and-trade system is a classic incubator-or-bubble question. Can our system for controlling greenhouse gases be adopted around the world? Or is California pursuing a foolish one-state war on climate change that will land us in a bubble of economy-destroying regulations?

The state's debate over its housing crisis offers a different spin on the question. Can California devise ways to incubate new and more affordable housing? Or will it allow local governments to keep housing out of their bubble-like cities?

The controversy over legislation to make ours a "sanctuary state" by limiting cooperation between California governments

and federal immigration authorities poses another bubble-or-incubator quandary.

Lawmakers understandably want to make sanctuary protections as strong as possible, given the importance of the undocumented to California and its communities, and Trump's ugly attempts at mass deportation. But the determination to extend protections even to undocumented criminals has alienated law enforcement officials even in progressive cities. Is an uncompromising sanctuary policy likely to isolate California politically? Or would legislation that preserves law enforcement flexibility be more likely to be adopted as a model in other states, thereby offering more protection to more immigrants nationwide?

Policy change is never easy here. In other contexts, the state, by failing to update itself, has become an anachronistic bubble. Take higher education. Once a model, the state's master plan for three distinct university systems—UC, Cal State, and community colleges—has become a straitjacket that prevents the universities from building partnerships and online programs to produce the greater numbers of college graduates California needs. Free speech on campus is another bubble-or-incubator question. Should universities be insular safe spaces that protect students, or incubators that encourage collisions between people and ideas, even those that offend?

Incubation can be overdone. In the Bay Area, there are so many incubators (or, if you prefer, combinators or accelerators) that they comprise their own sector. Nearly every startup, nonprofit or regional agency in California has some convoluted explanation of why it's a "model" of something-or-other. But there's more to being a good disseminator of ideas than simply claiming they're "new" to generate buzz and investment.

The state's obsession with incubating new models has made it common for protectors of bubbles to pass themselves off as

incubators. Consider the new “California model” that the state school board touts to track the progress of schools. Sounds new, but it’s really a fiendishly complicated system that makes it harder for parents and communities to hold campuses, teachers and their unions accountable.

In health care, the controversial Senate Bill 562 is similarly fraudulent. Its backers pitched it as a single-payer system that would incubate change across the nation; in fact, the bill failed to include the basics of such a system—like controls on spending or utilization of medical care, or ways to cover its \$400 billion costs.

At its worst, California is a bubble of distinctive and convoluted regulations and laws, which are hard to unwind, especially in a state with so many lawyers. Right now, it’s not helping matters that the new attorney general, Xavier Becerra, is a veritable bubble machine. Some of that’s good: He’s filing lawsuits to protect our state’s policy priorities from the Trump administration.

But he’s also responsible for the most foolish bubble-expanding policy of the year: expanding enforcement of a new California law that bans paid travel by state employees to states that have discriminatory laws on the books. Becerra has now listed eight states (Texas was among the recent adds) under this travel ban. Opposing discrimination is the state’s goal, but this ban is counterproductive. How are Californians to spread our more inclusive cultural values—and all the great ideas we’re hatching—to such places if our government representatives can’t visit them?

It’s hard work being an incubator. You have to engage with people you don’t like. You have to address not only your own problems, but also other people’s. But what is the point of a place as rich and lucky as California if it’s only going to be for itself? Incubators birth new things. And bubbles tend to pop.

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