

Opinion: SF vs. L.A.: A contest of contempt

By Joe Mathews

Which city—San Francisco or Los Angeles—do you love to hate more?

This is shaping up to be California's question for 2018. Each of the top contenders for governor is a former mayor of one of those cities, and each embodies certain grievances about his hometown. And backers of both candidates are already playing to resentments about these two places.



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Gavin Newsom, like San Francisco, is derided as too wealthy, too white, too progressive, too cerebral, too cold, and so focused on a culturally liberal agenda that you might call him out of touch. Antonio Villaraigosa, like Los Angeles, is derided as too street, too Latino, too instinctual, too warm, and so unfocused in his economically liberal agenda that you might say he lacks a center.

The interesting news of this contest of city loathing is that there is a contest at all.

For decades, Los Angeles has been second to none in the amount of contempt it feels from other Californians. The City of the Angels—with its smog and traffic and gangs and phony Hollywood

stars—represented everything the rest of the state was determined not to be. “Beat L.A.” was such a unifying chant—heard in stadiums and arenas from Sacramento to San Diego—that it could have replaced “Eureka” as the state motto.

San Francisco, on the other hand, was a place that Californians preferred to love. It was small and beautiful—the perfect weekend getaway.

But over the last generation, the relative positions of the cities have changed. Los Angeles has weakened—especially since the early 1990s recession—while San Francisco has become unimaginably wealthy and powerful.

In their study, “The Rise and Fall of Urban Economies: Lessons From San Francisco and Los Angeles,” UCLA’s Michael Storper and other researchers showed that the Bay Area and Greater L.A. were similar in the 1970s in household income, innovation, investment, education and creative jobs. But they have since diverged so that the Bay Area’s household incomes are 50 percent higher, and L.A. now lags in educational attainment and investment.

The study found that San Francisco’s open culture encouraged the exchange of ideas that drives growth, while L.A.’s top-down economy, dominated by a few key players, translated into less intellectual ferment, and too much investment in the old economy.

But this new, advanced, San Francisco Bay Area has stirred more resentment. It is too expensive for most Californians to even contemplate living there. Its technology companies now reach into our intimate lives, disrupting our livelihoods.

San Francisco also has taken over the state’s politics. One of our U.S. senators, Dianne Feinstein, is a former San Francisco mayor, while the other, Kamala Harris, is a former San Francisco district attorney. This power is not just the product of a tough San Francisco political culture that breeds

competitive candidates; it also reflects a public that participates more. Though the Bay Area has a million fewer voters than Los Angeles County, in elections the Bay Area often records more votes.

San Francisco, once famously open-minded, now faces the slur that it is unrepresentative—too narrow in its thinking. Peter Thiel, the conservative billionaire tech investor who backed Donald Trump's presidential campaign, is relocating his residence, business and foundation to L.A., because "Silicon Valley is a one-party state" that only tolerates liberals.

Of course, both cities are liberal places and have much in common, as do the two former mayors. Newsom and Villaraigosa are among America's most progressive politicians, representing two of America's most progressive places—though both have been friendly to business and development. Both are extraordinarily bright men who, perhaps because they struggled as students, sometimes betray insecurity about their intellectual faculties. Both endured personal scandals for which their cities have forgiven them.

And both come from cities facing similar challenges: sky-high housing prices, unrelenting homelessness, outdated infrastructure, and unbalanced economies that don't produce high-enough working-class wages. Both cities have a power to create their own alternative realities—and spawn some pretty daft ideas.

Ideally, California would get a governor who brings lessons from both cities.

Newsom, having run San Francisco, has experience navigating freakishly Byzantine politics and governing in a one-party place, which is what Sacramento has become. And Villaraigosa, having run a sprawling state-sized city, understands how to seize the attention of an apathetic public in a place with weak civic institutions, which describes much of California.

I wish Antonio had more of Gavin's Bay Area jones for data. And I wish Gavin had some of Antonio's L.A. groundedness and horse-sense. But what I most wish is that, during this year's political fight between two cities, we don't forget just how lucky California is to be home to both.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.