

# Opinion: California is second best

By Joe Mathews

Be first if you like. But in California, it's better to be second best.

This is the larger truth at work in the Golden State's June 5 elections. Because the top two finishers in each race advance to the November runoff election, almost all campaigning and TV ads are designed to put a particular candidate in second place.



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This fixation with finishing second isn't limited to our elections: Californians highly value second place in civics, arts, and technology.

Take Silicon Valley. Our tech industry used to run on the idea of the "first mover advantage"—the belief that whatever startup moved first into a space was likely to win.

But now "first mover advantage" is considered a myth. The evidence suggests that you'd rather be second in pursuing an idea— "a fast follower" in common phrasing—if you want your technology to succeed in the marketplace.

Ryan Holmes, founder and CEO of Hootsuite, noted on Medium that Microsoft came up with a tablet a decade before the more

successful iPad debuted, and that Snapchat pioneered disappearing images and other features, only to see Facebook co-opt its ideas.

“Ultimately ... it’s not who’s first to market but who’s best to market,” wrote Holmes. “As a second-mover, you benefit by having a clear, real target in your sights .... First-movers, by contrast, are forced to drive looking in the rear-view mirror.”

Being first is also no guarantee of reputational advantages. Uber, the ride-sharing leader, is widely distrusted, while Lyft, which trailed behind, is often celebrated. Fly-by-night news sites may get information up first, but you can better trust publications that do a better story later. Is it significant that California’s most distinguished newspaper, the *L.A. Times*, is moving from a first-rate downtown location to a smaller city named El Segundo? Its name, meaning “The Second,” nods to the city’s history as site of Standard Oil’s second big California refinery. (El Primero was in Richmond.)

Being second also makes you less of a target. The paparazzi go a lot easier on second-tier action star Keanu Reeves than on Tom Cruise. And there may be greater cachet in being second banana. Keith Richards is cooler than Mick Jagger. The Second World War is better understood than the first. The Dodgers are California’s most successful baseball franchise, but, with their expensive tickets and TV rights too costly for cable operators to show their games, you’re better off being a fan of the second-tier Angels.

And while people love to hate California’s biggest city, Los Angeles, who doesn’t love to love our state’s second most populous municipality, San Diego? If you believe the marketing, San Diego is “America’s finest city.”

As a whole, California—while maintaining that it’s a global leader—is actually No. 2 in some important measures. We’re the

second most diverse state (Hawai'i is tops). A recent study ranked our economy as the second best among American states (behind Washington). On the down side, we're second among states in number of people per house (behind Utah)—a reflection of our housing shortage.

In many things, being second is worth celebrating. The city of Stockton is happy—after surviving municipal bankruptcy—to be ranked as the second-most fiscally solvent city of the 75 largest cities in America. (Stockton's budget surplus is now more than \$3,000 per resident.) And California, according to consulting firm McKinsey, has the second lowest smoking and prisoner recidivism rates in the country.

Of course, when you're choosing a candidate for a job or high political office, you want to support the best. But California's top two system incentivizes people to select their second choice.

For example, say you're a Democrat who wants your party to win back the U.S. House of Representatives and serve as a check on President Trump.

If Gavin Newsom is your first choice for governor in this month's election, you might be better off voting for a different Democrat—like Antonio Villaraigosa, even if you don't like him much—so that he can finish second in the June election. That way, two Democrats would advance to the November election under the top two. That would likely lower the turnout of Republicans in November, and thus make it harder for California's Republican members of Congress to hold on to their seats in November.

The same holds true for a Republican who prefers the second-leading Republican contender for governor, Travis Allen, over John Cox, who according to polls has the best chance of getting into the top two. Vote for your top preference, and your party is probably less well-off.

Frustrating, yes. But this is how decision-making works in a state devoted to settling for second best.

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