

A hand is holding a small, rectangular cardboard house model. The house has a gabled roof and four square window cutouts arranged in a 2x2 grid. The background is a dark, teal-colored gradient.

# Penta Insiders

Policymaker Insights:

## **California's Most Pressing Issues:** Addressing Homelessness, Public Safety, and Environmental Policy

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## Executive Summary

The report "**California's Most Pressing Issues**" captures policymakers' perspectives on three critical challenges: homelessness, public safety, and environmental policy.

- **Homelessness:** Policymakers highlighted rising housing costs, mental health challenges, and funding inefficiencies as key concerns. Democrats emphasized expanding affordable housing and support services, while Republicans advocated for stricter encampment policies and accountability in funding.
- **Public Safety:** A top Republican priority, with crime, retail theft, and Proposition 47 at the center of debate. Republicans called for tougher penalties, increased policing, and sentencing reforms, while Democrats focused on community-based solutions, and social programs.
- **Environmental Policy:** Led by Democrats, California continues to drive aggressive climate action. Policymakers prioritized clean energy expansion, EV infrastructure, and corporate accountability, while Republicans cautioned against economic risks, advocating for energy affordability, job security, and a measured transition.

The report underscores policymakers' commitment to addressing these challenges while navigating political and economic complexities.

## Penta Insiders

At Penta, our mission is to foster non-partisan, impactful policy conversations by bridging the gap between policymakers and advocates through actionable insights. Each year, we connect with thousands of policymakers at every level of government; across Washington, D.C., state capitals, and around the globe, to gather invaluable feedback. This research powers our cutting-edge, tailored reports, addressing the critical challenges facing public servants today. Explore our insights, access exclusive reports, and stay informed by visiting [www.pentainsiders.com](http://www.pentainsiders.com). To join the conversation follow us on X [@pentainsiders](https://twitter.com/pentainsiders).

## Author's Note

In this report, we use the term "homelessness" rather than "unhoused" to remain consistent with the language used in our survey instruments and by many of the policymakers we interviewed. We deeply respect that some individuals and communities prefer the term "unhoused" for its emphasis on dignity and person-first framing. Our choice reflects a commitment to accurately representing the terminology used in our research process, while recognizing the importance of inclusive and respectful language in broader conversations.



## Policymaker Priorities: The Issues at the Forefront

California policymakers are facing a defining moment as they work to address the state's most pressing challenges. With Democrats controlling both legislative houses and the governorship, their policy decisions shape the state's direction. Homelessness, the cost of living, housing, environmental policy, crime, and public safety are all major concerns. However, the level of urgency and the types of solutions being proposed often differ by political party. Still, policymakers agree that these issues are urgent and have wide-reaching effects on communities, highlighting the need for timely and strategic action.

### California: What are the most pressing issues facing the state?

% of respondents who placed each issue in their top 3

	Total	Democrats	Republicans
Homelessness	44%	47%	41%
Cost-of-living	43%	42%	41%
Crime & Public Safety	34%	21%	57%
Housing	26%	36%	8%
Environment & Climate	20%	26%	7%
Immigration	19%	11%	33%
Healthcare	18%	21%	13%
Taxation	17%	13%	21%
Infrastructure	13%	13%	11%
The Economy	13%	13%	20%

Washington Policy Brand Research 2024

### Policymakers Grapple with Housing, Crime, and Climate

Policymakers across the political spectrum agree that homelessness and the rising cost of living are among the most urgent challenges facing communities, though they remain divided on the best path forward. Republicans see crime and public safety as the most pressing concern, while Democrats place less urgency on the issue. Similarly, environmental policy remains a point of contention, with Democrats emphasizing climate action and clean energy investment. As these issues shape the policy landscape, political perspectives will continue to influence both the urgency and the solutions being proposed.

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“At the top of the list are the social safety nets and homelessness and housing.”

Legislative Director, California State Assembly (D)

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“High crime is a huge issue for Californians. That's what we're hearing from our constituents, the homeless problem, and drug use, which they all kind of go hand in hand.”

Capitol Director, California State Assembly (R)

## California's Ongoing Crisis: Housing & Homelessness

The housing and homelessness crisis is viewed by policymakers as California's most pressing issue, driven by rising housing costs, economic instability, and a lack of affordable housing. These challenges are closely linked to the state's high cost of living, which was identified by policymakers as the second most pressing issue. California accounts for a significant portion of the nation's homeless population, with policymakers emphasizing its growing impact on public safety and economic stability. Partisan divisions over Housing First, the state's current approach to homelessness, remain stark. While Democrats largely support the model, some advocate for stronger integration of mental health and addiction services. Republicans, on the other hand, oppose Housing First as a stand-alone solution, favoring housing assistance tied to treatment or employment requirements and stricter encampment regulations.

### Partisan Perspectives on Housing & Homelessness Solutions

#### Democratic Perspective:

- Support Housing First but debate its implementation, some advocate for expanding services within the model, while others call for more accountability.
- Expand affordable housing programs, increase funding for low-income housing, and provide rental assistance to prevent homelessness.
- Increase investment in mental health & substance abuse services to support long-term stability for the unhoused population.
- Streamline housing development but maintain tenant protections (such as rent control and anti-eviction policies) to prevent displacement.

#### Republican Perspective:

- Generally oppose Housing First as a stand-alone model, arguing that it does not address the root causes of homelessness (mental illness, addiction, and unemployment).
- Tie housing assistance to treatment, employment, or rehabilitation participation, ensuring individuals are actively working toward stability.
- Reduce regulatory barriers to housing development, such as loosening zoning laws and reforming California's Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) to encourage private investment.

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"The Housing First model only works if the people that are being housed are actually clean and sober and mentally sound. What we've been doing is we've been housing people that are mentally ill and that are addicted to drugs and alcohol in places to live, expecting them to subscribe to services in hopes that they'll be able to maintain their housing. And we've seen through the last decade that that's not necessarily what works."

Council Member, Municipal (R)

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"The unhoused is one of the focal points of everybody right now and it really should be because so many of us throughout the whole United States we are dealing with this issue and that is something that most certainly needs to be a priority... The housing needs to be actually low income, it can't be \$2,500 for a one-bedroom apartment "

Mayor, Municipal (D)

#### Disclaimer:

We use the term "homelessness" to reflect the language used in our research. We recognize that some prefer "unhoused" and remain committed to respectful, inclusive dialogue.




## Public Safety & Crime: A Conservative Push for Law and Order

Policymakers expressed differing views on public safety and crime. Republicans, emphasized the urgency of crime reduction, with a focus on strengthening law enforcement, reforming the criminal justice system, and ensuring public safety. Democrats, while acknowledging the importance of public safety, prioritize addressing the housing crisis, linking homelessness to crime, and advocating for the Housing First approach to reduce crime by providing stable housing. While both parties agree on the need for public safety, Republicans stress immediate crime prevention, whereas Democrats favor long-term solutions through housing and social services.

### Republicans Prioritize Crime and Public Safety

As Republican policymakers focus on crime and public safety, they emphasize the urgent need for crime prevention and law enforcement reform, particularly to address issues like organized retail theft and urban crime. They advocate for stricter measures to restore public safety and hold offenders accountable.

#### Key Issues Identified by Republicans

-  **Law Enforcement Funding:** Policymakers vocalized their desires to increase resources for law enforcement agencies to ensure effective policing and crime prevention.
-  **Organized Retail Theft:** Policymakers underscored the growing concerns from business owners over rising thefts and a call for stronger enforcement measures.
-  **Proposition 47 Concerns:** Republicans view Proposition 47, which reduces penalties for nonviolent crimes, as a factor in rising crime rates. They advocate amending the proposition to strengthen penalties, believing it has contributed to a perception of reduced accountability for criminals.

#### Diverging Solutions

With Republicans calling for immediate reforms, particularly with Proposition 47, Democratic policymakers acknowledge there is an issue but argue that solving the housing crisis, especially homelessness, will address broader public safety concerns. Nonetheless, Republican policymakers will continue to advocate for immediate law enforcement action.

“The most important [policy priority] is public safety and Proposition 47. Those are the big issues in California. And after a few years of the practice of Proposition 47, we know it's failed.”

Vice-Mayor, Municipal (R)

“There's a lot more political with a capital P in that debate [crime & public safety], especially in this state, than there is actual data to show what's going on.”

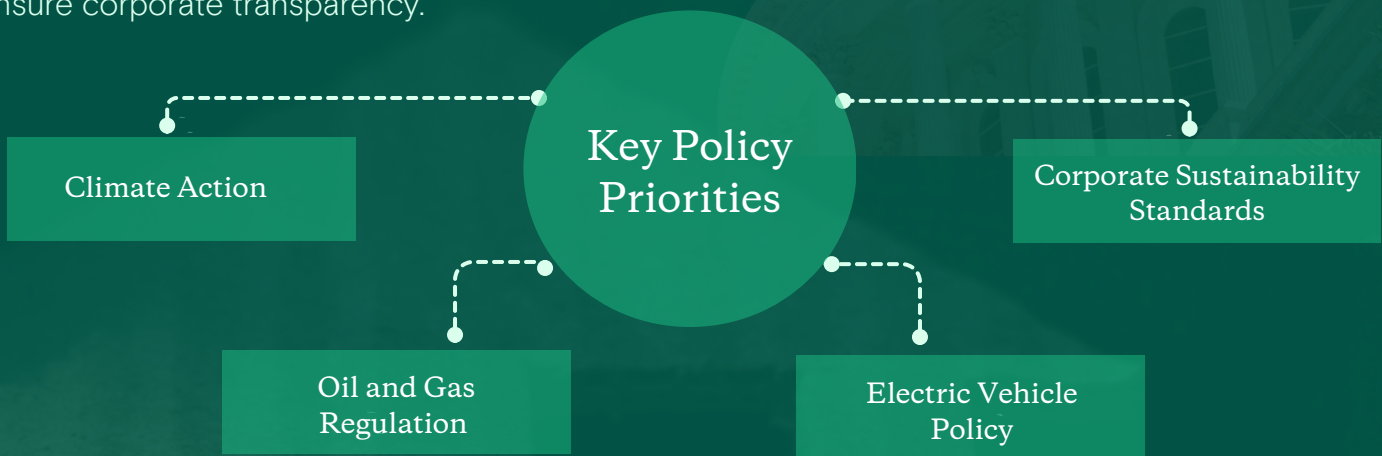
Chief of Staff, California State Senate (D)

## California's Environmental Agenda: Democratic Leadership in Action

Democratic policymakers in California are driving ambitious environmental policies, focusing on climate resilience, clean energy expansion, and stronger regulatory oversight. With a Democratic governor and a legislative supermajority, policymakers recognize the state as a leader in environmental action. While pushing bold initiatives, policymakers also grapple with economic feasibility and infrastructure challenges. Concurrently, Republican lawmakers have voiced concerns about the economic impact of these rapid transitions. They emphasize the need for energy affordability, job security, and a more measured approach to regulatory changes, advocating for policies that balance environmental goals with economic stability.

### Environmental Policy Priorities

Democratic policymakers balanced urgency and caution in advancing climate resilience, clean energy, and regulatory measures while addressing economic and infrastructure challenges. Key debates include EV expansion, oil and gas regulation, and stricter anti-greenwashing laws to ensure corporate transparency.



### Looking Ahead: A Greener Future

Democratic policymakers vocalized their efforts of pushing EV expansion and cracking down on corporate greenwashing, driving policies that will shape the state's environmental future. Even as challenges around infrastructure and energy security remain, Democratic policymakers continue to advocate for reducing emissions and speeding up the transition to clean energy. Oil and gas regulation remains a key focus, as policymakers work to curb fossil fuel reliance while ensuring energy stability. Policymakers also seem to note the need for increased climate action, through investments in wildfire prevention, extreme weather resilience, and establishing stringent carbon reduction goals. These initiatives reflect California's current governments commitment to environmental leadership and their hopes for a sustainable future.

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“California is the leader of the nation in addressing climate change impacts and trying to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. And that comes with a price tag. And I would like to make sure that the budget doesn't get in the way of that.”

Mayor, Municipal (D)

## California Policy Watch: Where Things Stand Now

Since our 2024 Washington Policy Brand Research was conducted, California's policy landscape has continued to evolve. Governor Gavin Newsom's 2025-26 budget proposal introduced new initiatives and funding priorities that reflect the state's shifting approach to key issues. From the creation of a housing and homelessness agency to adjustments in public safety and environmental funding, these developments offer important context on how state leadership could respond to the ongoing challenges.

### Housing & Homelessness: A New Approach to Accountability

In his 2025-26 budget proposal, Governor Newsom introduced plans to create the California Housing and Homelessness Agency to streamline efforts and improve the state's response to housing affordability and homelessness prevention.

#### Key Developments in Housing Policy:

- **New State Agency:** The California Housing and Homelessness Agency will create a more integrated administrative framework for tackling homelessness.
- **Local Accountability Measures:** The agency will oversee cities and counties to ensure compliance with state housing mandates.
- **Ongoing Budget Negotiations:** This is an initial proposal, meaning funding levels and policy specifics may shift as negotiations progress.

### Crime & Public Safety: Strategic Funding Adjustments

Governor Newsom's public safety budget includes funding cuts aimed at saving costs, with reductions to courts and correctional spending, even as the state continues to address crime and law enforcement issues.

#### Key Public Safety Provisions:

- \$97 million cut in funding for trial court operations.
- Over \$80 million in reductions to the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.
- \$10 million decrease in funding for the California Department of Justice's Division of Law Enforcement.

### Environmental Policy: Climate Bonds for Sustainability

Newsom's 2025-26 budget shifts over \$3 billion in environmental funding from the General Fund to climate bonds, which will help pay for long-term sustainability and climate resilience projects as California's environmental efforts continue to evolve.

#### Key Environmental Policy Updates:

- \$3 billion+ funding shift from general funds to climate bond financing.

## Looking Ahead: Navigating Policy Ambitions Amid Budget and Political Shifts

As California continues to face challenges like homelessness, public safety, and environmental sustainability, limited funding and changing federal dynamics could shape what's possible. Governor Newsom's latest budget aims to keep progress going, but growing pressures may affect how far that progress can go.

### State Budget Pressures: Medi-Cal and Policy Trade-Offs

Although, Governor Newsom's 2025-26 budget outlines major investments in housing, homelessness, public safety, and climate initiatives these proposals come at a time when California is facing significant fiscal challenges. A projected \$6 billion shortfall in Medi-Cal, California's healthcare program for low-income residents, reflects rising costs driven by sustained enrollment and the loss of temporary federal funding. This financial strain may limit the state's ability to fully fund new initiatives, requiring policymakers to weigh priorities and consider potential trade-offs.

### Federal Dynamics: Responding to a Changing Political Landscape

The Trump administration's return to Washington, presents California's Democratic-led government with possible new challenges. It's still to be determined whether state leaders will choose to collaborate with the federal government or take a more oppositional approach. Major issues like climate policy, immigration, and healthcare could test the balance between federal priorities and California's long-standing commitments, shaping how the state moves forward in the months ahead.

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