

An earthquake is building in Tuesday's California elections that could rattle the political landscape from coast to coast.

In Los Angeles and San Francisco, two of the nation's most liberal large cities, voters are poised to send **stinging messages of discontent** over mounting public disorder, as measured in both upticks in certain kinds of crime and pervasive homelessness.

That dissatisfaction could translate into the recall of San Francisco's left-leaning district attorney, Chesa Boudin, likely by a resounding margin, and a strong showing in the Los Angeles mayoral primary by Rick Caruso, a billionaire real estate developer and former Republican who has emerged as the leading alternative in the race to Democratic US Rep. Karen Bass, once considered the front-runner.

Linking both these contests -- as well as several Los Angeles City Council races and an ongoing effort to recall George Gascon, Los Angeles County's left-leaning district attorney -- is a widespread sense among voters in both cities that **local government is failing at its most basic responsibility**: to ensure public safety and order. It's a sentiment similar to the anxiety over urban disarray that inspired the **"broken windows" policing theory during the 1980s**, and contributed to the election of Republican Mayors Rudy Giuliani and Richard Riordan in New York and Los Angeles, respectively, amid the cascading violence of the crack epidemic in the early 1990s.

Tuesday's California results will likely **send a stark message to the Democrats controlling Congress and the White House**. The outcome will again underscore how much danger a party in power can face when voters feel that **certainty has been stripped from their lives** -- a dynamic that extends beyond crime and homelessness to inflation, soaring gasoline prices and continued disruption from the unending Covid pandemic.

"In the broadest perspective, the voters and residents are feeling that the governing regime, the liberal Democratic regime that has dominated LA for the last 30 years, and California and San Francisco, is not meeting the moment," says Fernando Guerra, a political scientist who directs the Center for the Study of Los Angeles at Loyola Marymount University.

Zev Yaroslavsky, who served on the LA City Council and then the LA County Board of Supervisors for almost 40 years starting in 1975, says the only time he can remember Los Angeles voters as discontented as they are today was in the late 1970s, an era of high inflation and soaring property tax bills that produced California's Proposition 13 and the tax revolt that helped elect Ronald Reagan president in 1980.

"What people used to take for granted they can no longer take for granted -- on your ability to pay your rent, your ability to walk the streets safely, on your ability not to be accosted by a homeless person," says Yaroslavsky, now director of the Los Angeles Initiative at the Luskin School of Public Affairs at the University of California Los Angeles. *"It's a lack of confidence in government's ability to respond."*

Los Angeles City Council President Nury Martinez, who took office in 2013, feels those gusts too. *"I've never seen a more angry electorate than this particular election,"* she told me. *"I think all of this is just at a boiling point."*

A flipped agenda

The dominant role of crime and homelessness in the Los Angeles and San Francisco elections represents an inversion of the political agenda since the summer of 2020. Like dozens of other cities, both places saw protesters for police reform fill the streets following George Floyd's murder. In Los Angeles, that energy helped propel Gascon to a narrow victory over the law enforcement-backed District Attorney Jackie Lacey in November 2020 and also powered voter approval of a ballot initiative to combat racial inequities by shifting county funds toward social services and alternatives to incarceration.

Boudin, the San Francisco district attorney, who was narrowly elected in 2019, and Gascon have pursued largely parallel agendas **centered on reducing incarceration** through measures such as a virtual prohibition on trying juveniles as adults, the **rejection of "enhancements"** (for such factors as gang involvement or use of

a gun) that extend sentence lengths and a policy **of not prosecuting "quality of life" misdemeanors** associated with homelessness, such as trespassing and public urination.

That agenda quickly faced fierce resistance from other elements in the criminal justice system committed to traditional approaches, including the unions representing police in both cities. Law enforcement interests are backing the recalls against Gascon and Boudin, and in LA the police union is spending heavily against Bass, a leader in the House of Representatives' passage last year of sweeping federal police reform legislation. The **recall efforts against Boudin and Gascon, as well as Caruso's mayoral bid** in Los Angeles, have also drawn support from big Republican donors, who constitute a distinct minority in both cities.

The role of both law enforcement insiders and conservative donors and activists has frustrated advocates for police reform, who see the backlash across these many fronts as an attempt to restore hardline approaches before new alternatives are given a chance to demonstrate whether they can succeed.

"I think to a very large degree that more conservative forces have been very, very adept at framing the issues of homelessness and of crime so that the discussion about ... how to respond to those two issues is very, very narrow," says Los Angeles City Council Member Mike Bonin, an outspoken liberal who is not seeking reelection this year after narrowly avoiding a recall drive centered on his resistance to tougher measures against the endemic homelessness across his Westside district.

Yet the evidence is overwhelming that the unease dominating Tuesday's elections extends far beyond conservative circles. Yaroslavsky points out that in the UCLA Luskin School's annual polling across Los Angeles County, concern about crime has increased substantially not only among Whites, but among Hispanics, Blacks and Asian Americans as well.

Ben LaBolt, a San Francisco-based Democratic strategist and former campaign spokesperson for Barack Obama, likewise notes that **prominent local Democrats have played leading roles in the effort to recall Boudin.** *"The notion that this [recall] is some right-wing misinformation campaign is dangerous for Democrats to say or think, because it's definitely not,"* he says.

In both cities, anxiety about public safety is rising faster than the actual trends in reported crime. The online dashboard maintained by the San Francisco Police Department shows that through May 29 (the latest week for which figures are available) burglaries and break-ins or thefts of motor vehicles are clearly up from the comparable period in 2019, before Boudin took office. But assaults and homicides are virtually unchanged over that period, and robberies are down, as are the total number of serious offenses.

In Los Angeles the trends are more consistently troublesome: The Los Angeles Police Department's tracking system shows that through late May both property crimes and violent crimes had increased substantially over the comparable period in 2020 (before Gascon's election). But even in LA, both violent and property crimes remain a small fraction of their elevated levels in the 1990s and well below their rates for most of this century's first decade.

"We are not seeing numbers that look anything like some of the worst eras that people have been through," says Michelle Parris, California program director at the Vera Institute of Justice, speaking on behalf of Vera Action, a criminal justice advocacy group. Moreover, she points out, California communities with tough-on-crime policies like Sacramento and rural Kern County are experiencing crime upticks that in some cases exceed the increases in Los Angeles and San Francisco. *"We've seen that even tough-on-crime prosecutors in California have not delivered safety,"* she says. *"They are subject to the same exact trends we are seeing around the country."*

A problem with high visibility

Like many other observers in both cities, Parris points to a different cause than crime per se as the primary driver of rising anxiety over public safety. *"Homelessness and untreated mental illness ... impacts people's perception of safety,"* she says. *"And so I think that's part of why in places like Los Angeles or San Francisco in particular, where [that] is quite visible, that has a great impact of what people are talking about."*

In both cities, pervasive homelessness has rekindled the concern about losing control of city streets that inspired advocates of the "broken windows" theory to argue 40 years ago for greater enforcement against crimes of "disorder" like loitering, panhandling and public intoxication. In San Francisco, concern has centered on the Tenderloin neighborhood, which has been overwhelmed with open drug use among the homeless. In Los Angeles, the mayoral and City Council races have been dominated by concerns about the spread of large homeless encampments across the city. These encampments have proliferated despite the approval of two ballot initiatives in Los Angeles in 2016 authorizing substantial expenditures to build housing and provide services for the homeless -- and the City Council's passage of an ordinance last fall authorizing the removal of encampments around sensitive areas such as schools, libraries and day care centers.

"Take a look at our streets: No matter where you live now, you can walk down the street, you can look out your front window, and you will see ... that what the city and the county have been doing simply is not working," says Martinez, the LA City Council president.

Yaroslavsky, the former city and county official, says the persistence of the homeless encampments has become a viscerally visible symbol of fundamental governmental failure. *"I think homelessness is both a real issue but it's also a metaphor for everything else that's gone wrong in society and government's ability to address something that is so visible and so ubiquitous in the county,"* he says. *"So it's like a billboard that says failure."*

The neighborhood uproar over a large encampment around the public library in the traditionally liberal oceanfront LA community of Venice encapsulates the discontent that has upended politics in both cities. After the city of Los Angeles finally cleared out a massive homeless encampment along the Venice boardwalk that attracted national attention, a new one developed last fall around the community's public library. It has now engulfed the library on all sides, angering and frightening nearby residents, who have posted viral videos of rampant drug use and violence in the area. Longtime library patrons have publicly lamented that they no longer feel safe using the facility, which was also threatened by a recent fire that started in the camp.

"There's slashings. There's shootings," says Elizabeth Clay, a local activist and land use planner who has been involved in community protests against the encampment. *"My last email to the mayor's office was that, amongst other things, we just had a massacre in Texas, an unstable man who was ignored, but it's not like people didn't know he was unstable. We have a park of mentally unstable people currently slashing and shooting each other. What would make us think this wouldn't turn into something much more tragic?"*

To frustrated residents, the effective surrender of the library -- the quintessential public service -- to a homeless encampment amounts to a perverse elevation of the interests of those who don't pay taxes over those residents who do. Many, like Clay, express deep disappointment with outgoing Mayor Eric Garcetti, who they view as disengaged from his job and the mounting crisis on the streets as he tries to win approval for his nomination as ambassador to India.

But the principal focus of residents' ire is Bonin, the liberal council member who was one of two to oppose the ordinance barring camping around sensitive facilities. The city's anti-camping ordinance requires that the council vote to approve each individual enforcement action, and Clay and others say that Bonin has repeatedly blocked plans for such efforts around the library. In the interview, Bonin denied blocking cleanup plans (except for once, he said, when he asked the city to hold off while he tried to assemble a broader interagency response that never materialized). But he was adamant in insisting that simply dismantling the tent city in the park would only compound the problem unless it was accompanied by permanent housing and services for the homeless now living there. *"If there is a massive enforcement without offering services ... what that's going to do is just move people across the street in front of people's homes and deeper into residential neighborhoods,"* he argues.

Voters feel conflicted

There is still substantial support in Los Angeles for providing services to homeless people. Even Caruso, who has promised to build much more housing and provide more services to the homeless, sounds very different from Giuliani and other early hardline advocates of the broken windows theory, whose policies were often derided as unfairly increasing police enforcement against young minority men. No mainstream voice in either

city is suggesting that policymakers can simply arrest their way out of the homeless crisis or even the uptick in crime. But all sides in the debate agree the public appears out of patience, both in San Francisco and Los Angeles, with a set of policies that has surrendered control of public spaces and made it difficult for residents to get through the day without **encountering people who appear to be a danger to themselves or others.**

The same ebbing of patience is visible in the often-expressed belief that Boudin and Gascon, by placing so much priority on reducing incarceration, have encouraged a sense of invulnerability among repeat criminal offenders. *"The voters are conflicted: Karen Bass, Mike Bonin, all these guys, they reflect our values,"* says Guerra, the political scientist. *"But that's not where we are right now. The moment is about homelessness, public safety, and they are not even speaking to that."*

Caruso has declared that if elected he will declare emergency powers as mayor that authorize him to clear homeless encampments without approval from the City Council. Bass hasn't gone that far, but she's also pledged to end encampments. *"There are some things you just don't do outside, and sleeping is one of them,"* Bass has repeatedly said.

Whoever wins the LA mayoral race, *"the tide is turning, and now I feel that in each district you have an avalanche of people who are just outright pissed off at the state of affairs in our city,"* says Martinez, the City Council president. *"I believe that is what is moving the council to take a harder stance on allowing encampments to remain."*

The same trajectory is evident on policing. While activists had hoped to significantly redirect funding away from the LAPD -- an institution with a long history of racial bias -- in the aftermath of the Floyd murder, Caruso is now promising to add 1,500 officers. Even Bass, while not abandoning her calls for reform and accountability, wants to maintain the department's current staffing level and move more officers out from desk jobs to augment its presence on the streets.

It's still an open question how far this public demand for order will extend. Boudin's recall seems almost inevitable, and it will likely reinforce the message of the recent recalls of three very liberal members of the city's Board of Education: that local residents want their government to focus less on absolutist ideological statements than on delivering basic services. LaBolt predicts that after Boudin, San Francisco won't see a lurch to the right on law enforcement but rather a recalibration toward the center: *"I think what we'll see is a return to the assertion that you don't have to choose between public safety and criminal justice reform."*

The landscape in LA is complex too. Polls show widespread discontent with Gascon's performance, and the campaign against him claims it is well on its way toward obtaining the signatures it needs by early July to qualify a recall against him on the November ballot. But it is not unusual in California for such efforts to fail after large number of signatures are disqualified. Meanwhile, the county's hardline and scandal-tarred sheriff, Alex Villanueva, who has denounced liberal policies on crime and homelessness, will likely face a runoff after Tuesday with a challenger to his left. Tuesday's City Council primaries could see strong showings for hardline law-and-order candidates -- in particular in Bonin's district, where discontent is peaking -- but in several other districts, left-leaning candidates deeply critical of the LAPD and the anti-encampment laws are mounting serious challenges to more centrist incumbents.

Even the mayoral race shows conflicting currents. The fact that Caruso, a former Republican, is demonstrating so much strength is revealing in itself (even if he's been buoyed by his massive personal spending). But Caruso has endorsed conventionally liberal positions on almost all issues beyond crime and homelessness, and most analysts expect that he and Bass will meet in a November runoff because neither will attract the 50% of the vote needed to win outright on Tuesday.

Caruso's promises to restore order "can have great appeal ... in a time that is unsettled and you have \$30 million to spend," says Manuel Pastor, director of the Dornsife Equity Research Institute at the University of Southern California. "The question is whether or not there's a cap to that [support] similar to the top that there was to the recall campaign" against California Gov. Gavin Newsom in 2021, which qualified for the ballot but then failed last fall.

Yet even if Bass ultimately squeezes past Caruso, Gascon narrowly avoids a recall or San Francisco doesn't swing hard to the right on law enforcement if Boudin is recalled, the evidence suggests Democrats would be wrong to minimize the magnitude of the tremors building in California. In both Los Angeles and San Francisco, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that the most progressive forces have opened the door to a right-tilting backlash by failing to adequately respond to, or even acknowledge, the depth of public discontent over the mounting disorder -- even among many voters who lean left in their values. More than even the specific issues of crime and homelessness, "what's feeding the beast" of backlash "is just **the general sense of disarray and dysfunction** that is permeating everything," says veteran Democratic pollster Paul Maslin, who is advising an independent expenditure campaign supporting Bass.

The parallel to national politics is the potential for a seismic backlash in November among voters unsettled by all the disruptions to daily life -- from inflation to Covid-19 to crime -- that have persisted through Joe Biden's presidency. That continued turbulence has undermined the **implicit promise of his candidacy: to return the nation to something approaching normalcy** after all the turmoil of the Donald Trump presidency.

In all likelihood, the results in Los Angeles and San Francisco on Tuesday will **underscore how far voters feel from normalcy** even in two of the nation's most staunchly Democratic communities.