

Upton Sinclair's 1934 EPIC Campaign: Anatomy of a Political Movement

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Upton Sinclair's 1934 End Poverty in California (EPIC) campaign for governor has long attracted the attention of scholars and journalists. One of the radical political initiatives that challenged Franklin Roosevelt and moved his New Deal to the left, EPIC has intrigued three generations of commentators: the first considered it a dangerous "panacea movement," the second liked its idealism, and now a third generation is beginning to compare political responses to the Great Depression and Great Recession, looking for strategies and lessons. The EPIC story is instructive. In a move that pioneered a strategy recently used by the Tea Party movement, the famous author and long-time socialist attempted to capture one of the major political parties. He almost succeeded. His audacious plan to end unemployment and rebuild California's economy on the basis of "production for use" in a system of cooperative farms and factories earned him a resounding victory in the California Democratic Party primary that summer of 1934 as the New Deal headed into its first set of midterm elections. Was California turning to socialism? The answer was no, and that too has interested historians. The "stop-Sinclair" effort has been called one of the dirtiest campaigns and a pivotal moment in American electoral history, the first case of advertising agency professionals using their skills to shape elections. But none of the scholarship to date has looked carefully at the EPIC movement itself. Who voted for EPIC? Who organized and led the campaign at local levels? What sort of political movement was this? And why does it matter?¹

Nancy Quam-Wickham began this project with me, and we are jointly responsible for much of the data and preliminary analysis. She has kindly allowed me to use these data. Thanks also to Margaret Miller for helping with research and to the University of California, Berkeley, Institute for Labor and Employment for supporting data collection. For detail about data and methods and additional information about the campaign, please visit depts.washington.edu/epic34/anatomy.shtml.

1. The most important account of the campaign was written by Sinclair himself shortly after the election: Upton Sinclair, *I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Also see Greg Mitchell, *The Campaign of the Century: Upton Sinclair's Race for Governor of*

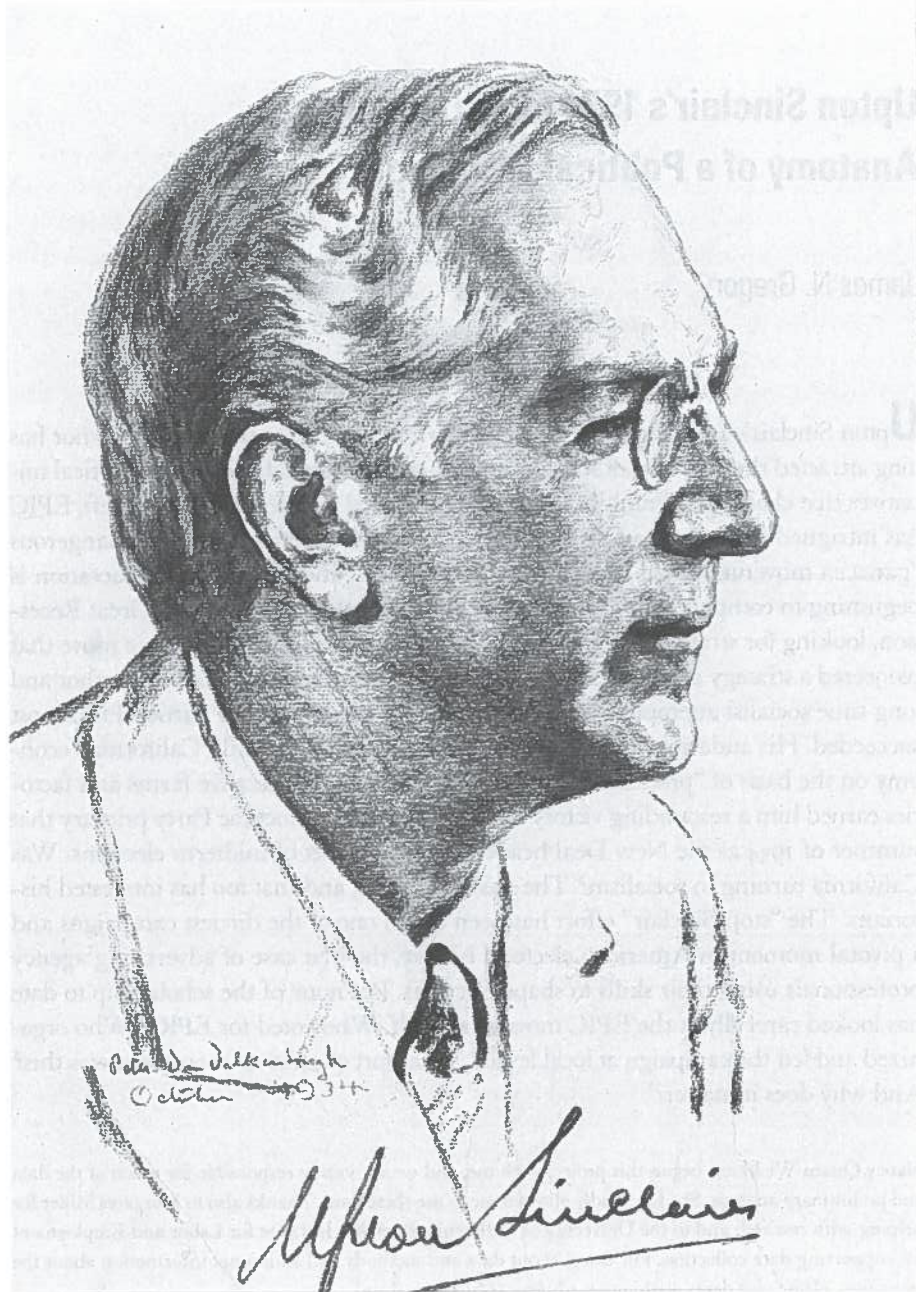


Figure 1. Portrait of Upton Sinclair by artist Peter Van Valkenburgh for the Works Progress Administration. Courtesy of Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

For nearly eighty years, most historians have followed the lead of Carey McWilliams and George Creel, who, for somewhat different reasons, both decided that EPIC was an exotic and irresponsible manifestation of middle-class Depression-era anxieties. Creel, who was Sinclair's opponent in the Democratic primary, charged that the End Poverty campaign was an example of Los Angeles "crackpotism." McWilliams agreed and assigned the movement to the region's "disoriented middle class." Arthur Schlesinger Jr. moved this assertion into the histories of the Great Depression, and the myth of middle-class support has survived ever since, including in Kevin Starr's magisterial series of California histories.²

This article takes a close look at election data to demonstrate that EPIC mobilized a largely working-class electorate. Ironically, the movement was too working class for its own good; it was the failure to reach white-collar and rural voters that cost Sinclair a chance at victory. But demography is only a partial guide to electoral behavior. Political opportunity is the second theme of this essay. The political infrastructure and resources of various regions of the state affected levels of access to and enthusiasm for the Sinclair movement. Looking in detail at several hundred volunteers who became local leaders of the EPIC movement, we will see that Sinclair tapped into a pool of talented activists whose availability and interest had much to do with the disorganized condition of the Democratic Party and the suppression of other venues for progressive political activism. The middle-class background of many of these leaders also helps explain the confusion over the class dimensions of the movement.

This close study of an electoral campaign has implications beyond its specific time and place. Historically, it helps us understand the possibilities and limits of radical politics in the context of the early New Deal. Methodologically, it demonstrates both tools and theory that historians might use to analyze other political campaigns. And then there is the intriguing echo in our own political era. Since 2010, Sinclair's strategy of invading a major party and using primary election victories to turn it toward a radical agenda has been a strategy of the Right, not the Left, employed by the Tea Party movement with stunning effects on the Republican Party.

The Campaign

Sinclair was fifty-four years old in the summer of 1933 when the idea of EPIC began to take shape. A socialist for most of his adult life, he was, since the death of Eugene Debs, America's most famous radical and the Left's most effective educator. Author of *The Jungle* and more than forty other books, Sinclair could reach audiences far beyond the range of other radical writers. Since 1915, he had made his home in

California and the Birth of Media Politics (New York: Random House, 1992); and Clarence Fredric McIntosh, "Upton Sinclair and the EPIC Movement, 1933-1936" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1955).

2. George Creel, *Rebel at Large: Recollections of Fifty Crowded Years* (New York: Putnam, 1947), 268-88; Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Santa Barbara: Gibbs Smith, 1973), 293-313; Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 121-55.

wealthy Pasadena, a Los Angeles suburb, where he found the isolation he needed to keep up his two-book-a-year writing pace. Only occasionally, prior to 1933, had he been lured out of his study and into political activism. The California Socialist Party asked him now and then to run for governor, and often he agreed, but he did so merely as a gesture. He refused to actually campaign. Still, his name on the ballot would always help the Socialist Party (SP). In the 1930 gubernatorial race, he had received nearly fifty thousand votes.³

Now he was walking away from the SP. Norman Thomas's 1932 presidential campaign had been a massive disappointment, yielding less than sixty-four thousand votes in California. Sinclair felt that the Left was hampered by several problems. The label *socialist* was one. Americans, he decided, regarded socialism as a "foreign movement." Too much talk about the working class was another: "I saw the middle classes suffering just as much as the manual workers and farmers." Finally, the two-party system seemed unbreakable. The SP was never going to win at the ballot box. It was time to see what could be done working inside the Democratic Party.⁴

Not that he was impressed by Franklin Roosevelt and other Democrats. The New Deal was only six months old, but Sinclair was sure that it was headed in the wrong direction. An estimated 700,000 Californians had been unemployed when Franklin Roosevelt took office, and while federal relief funds were now helping the state, the jobless numbers had barely changed. Moreover, the administration's key program, the National Recovery Act, was based on a formula of supporting corporate profits while restricting production. That made no sense to him, not when people were hungry and in need. But the author had been working on an alternative to the New Deal, a plan for ending the Depression and forging a pathway to socialism.⁵

In early September, Sinclair reregistered as a Democrat. On his desk was the platform that he would bring to voters, his plan to end poverty. "I say, positively and without qualification, we can end poverty in California," he had written. "I know exactly how to do it, and if you elect me Governor, with a Legislature to support me, I will put the job through—and I won't take more than one or two of my four years." It was all spelled out in a sixty-four-page booklet with the curious title, *I, Governor of California and How I Ended Poverty: A True Story of the Future*, written from the perspective of 1938, five years hence.⁶

The campaign that followed had consequences on many fronts. It helped destroy the SP, which never recovered from the defections in California and elsewhere. It propelled California's Democrats down a road that was well to the left of the

3. Upton Sinclair, *The Autobiography of Upton Sinclair* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1962); Lauren Coodley, *Upton Sinclair: California Socialist, Celebrity Intellectual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013); Anthony Arthur, *Radical Innocent: Upton Sinclair* (New York: Random House, 2006); Kevin Mattson, *Upton Sinclair and the Other American Century* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2006).

4. Sinclair, *I, Candidate*, 5–7.

5. Upton Sinclair, *I, Governor of California and How I Ended Poverty: A True Story of the Future*, 10th ed. (Los Angeles: printed by author, 1934), 12–13.

6. Sinclair, *I, Governor*, 7.

New Deal, costing them in the process their chance to control the state. It revitalized the Republican Party. Instead of withering under the New Deal onslaught that elsewhere buried the GOP, California Republicans seized the middle ground and, with the exception of the four brief years after 1938, held it for the next generation. At the same time, the campaign gave the Roosevelt administration a jolt that provided some of the impetus for a new round of New Deal legislation in 1935 that established the Works Progress Administration, the rural Resettlement Administration, the National Labor Relations Act, and the Social Security Act.⁷

Historians often wrongly group EPIC with the Townsend Old-Age Pension movement, Huey Long's Share-the-Wealth clubs, and the National Union of Social Justice of Father Charles Coughlin, each of which gained publicity in 1933 and 1934 with proposals that seemed to challenge the moderate agendas of the early New Deal. These flamboyant projects may or may not have been of the Left and may or may not have had the following that their leaders claimed. Their agendas were vague, and they were never tested at the polls.

EPIC was different. Its leader was a dedicated radical; its goal was to win elections and turn a state economy away from capitalism. Ideologically, EPIC and Midwestern farmer-laborism had much in common. Farmer-Labor Party candidate Floyd Olson's victory in the 1931 Minnesota governor's race inspired Sinclair to begin thinking about what could be done in California. But EPIC represented a new strategy. Instead of being a third party, it would try to take over the Democratic Party. Progressives and the Nonpartisan League had done something similar with the Republican Party a generation before. This was the first time that radicals had tried it with the Democratic Party. Soon there would be similar efforts in Oregon, Washington, and other states. The consequences would be lasting. It represented the start of a fusion between the Left and the Democratic Party that continues today.⁸

Some elements of Sinclair's EPIC plan were moderate and practical, such as \$50 a month pensions for the elderly and disabled and graduated income and property taxes. But the heart of the platform was a visionary proposal for the state to take over unused farms and idle factories and turn them over to the unemployed, who would produce goods for their own subsistence and also for exchange with similar enterprises. Inspired by the network of self-help cooperatives and barter clubs that had spread across the Los Angeles basin in 1932 and 1933, Sinclair envisioned a state-run system based on the principle of "production for use" that would compete with, and ultimately replace, the capitalist system of production for profit. He described how it

7. For an assessment of impacts, see James Gregory, introduction to Sinclair, *I, Candidate*; Leonard Leader, "Upton Sinclair's EPIC Switch: A Dilemma for American Socialists," *Southern California Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (1980): 361–85; and Robert E. Burke, *Olson's New Deal for California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953).

8. The La Follette brothers' successful 1934 campaigns at the head of the Wisconsin Progressive Party were, like the Minnesota case, examples of third parties that had well-established foundations before the 1930s.

would work. Once elected, he would ask the legislature to create three powerful agencies, with names keyed to memorable, New Deal-inspired acronyms. The California Authority for Land (CAL) would acquire, using eminent-domain law, unused farm land and establish a system of cooperative "land colonies." The California Authority for Production (CAP) would coordinate a similar system of factories and other enterprises that would put the urban unemployed to work. Goods and services would circulate in this cooperative system using a special currency to be issued by the California Authority for Money (CAM), which would also create a state bank and issue bonds to initially finance the new system.⁹

The plan was vague on critical issues. Would the state pay for the land and capital equipment or acquire them through confiscatory taxes? What would it cost? Who would buy the bonds to finance the system, and how would the bonds be repaid? How would the cooperative and capitalist economies interact? Questions of constitutionality were ignored as were the administrative complications involved in running such a vast system of production and distribution. Friendly critics said it was impractical; conservatives charged that it would "Sovietize California"; leaders of the SP said it would fail and discredit genuine socialism; communists assailed Sinclair as a "misleader" intent on subverting the revolutionary potential of the working class. The plan had its flaws, but there was no mistaking the radical intentions of the proposal. Writing as if the future had already happened, Sinclair foretold the end of capitalism and the spread of EPIC nationwide: "Private industry began to crumble; and as quickly as any productive enterprise failed, it was made over into a public institution. Nothing could withstand the current of co-operation."¹⁰

And there was no mistaking the plan and the candidate's powerful appeal. The mail started arriving immediately after the initial newspaper reports about Sinclair's decision to run for governor, with people writing to offer support and asking for information. The candidate and his growing staff of volunteers answered with copies of the *I, Governor* booklet, for which they charged \$.15 or whatever the correspondent could send. The booklet became the organizing tool. It described not only the program but also the campaign strategy. Sinclair had written that followers would begin to form EPIC clubs all over the state, and they did just that, inviting neighbors to meetings, selling the booklets, discussing what soon was known throughout the state as "The Plan." By late December 1933, with the election still eleven months away, there were already 103 EPIC clubs, and two months later the campaign counted nearly 300. After that it was hard to keep track. Sinclair estimated that by the end there were close to 2,000 clubs. Also in late December, the campaign launched a monthly newspaper, *Upton Sinclair's End Poverty Paper*, which later became the weekly *EPIC News*. Sent in bundles to each club, it was sold on the streets for \$.05 by volunteers who earned \$.02 with each sale. Other than the newspaper and the chaotic campaign headquarters in downtown Los Angeles, the movement depended more on

9. Sinclair, *I, Governor*, 16–23.

10. *Ibid.*, 59.

decentralized initiatives than on clear plans and central coordination. In the months leading up to the August primary, thousands of volunteers, whose backgrounds we will analyze later, joined the End Poverty crusade, taking the initiative to start new clubs and spreading the campaign into hundreds of communities.¹¹

EPIC was well under way before the regular Democrats began to identify candidates. Sinclair convinced one early opponent, Sacramento attorney Sheridan Downey, to become his running mate. That left perennial candidates Justus Wardell and Milton Young, along with newcomer George Creel, in the Democratic primary race. Creel was the most serious contender. Famous for his work with the Committee on Public Information, Woodrow Wilson's World War I propaganda agency, Creel was now west coast director of the National Recovery Administration. The most important New Deal official in California, he was probably the most electable candidate the Democrats might have put forth in 1934. Yet not even he could unite the factionalized party regulars.¹²

California's Democratic Party was just emerging from a long hibernation. For thirty years, the state had belonged to the Republicans. Never in the twentieth century had Californians elected a Democratic Governor and only once a Senator. As late as 1930, not a single Democrat held statewide office, while Republicans claimed twelve of the state's thirteen seats in the US House and Senate and an overwhelming 111 out of 120 seats in the state legislature. The Democrats' problems had to do partly with the fact that there were really two Republican Parties, one progressive and the other conservative. The other problem was the deep division among Democrats. Mirroring the ethnocultural conflict that hampered the party on a national level, California Democrats were divided between a northern Catholic faction and a southern Protestant faction; and the two wings had spent the 1920s fighting over the issue of prohibition.¹³

Even if the regular Democrats had managed to unite, it would have been too late. By June, EPIC had nominated a slate of candidates for the legislature and had built up a massive if loosely coordinated political organization with operations in most of the state's eighty assembly districts. Sinclair maintained a busy speaking schedule, his events attracting hundreds of supporters in the early months, thousands later, who handed over the nickels, dimes, and quarters that financed the elaborate campaign. He also spoke frequently on the radio, in time slots purchased with those dimes and nickels and also some large donations by longtime socialist "angels" Kate Crane Gartz and Aline Barnsdall.¹⁴

11. See the early issues of *Upton Sinclair's End Poverty Paper*; Sinclair, *Candidate*, 25.

12. Creel, *Rebel at Large*, 268–88.

13. Michael P. Rogin and John L. Shover, *Political Change in California: Critical Elections and Social Movements, 1890–1966* (Westport: Greenwood, 1970), 90–147; Royce D. Delmatier, "The Rebirth of the Democratic Party in California, 1928–1938" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1955).

14. Sinclair, *I, Candidate*, 27, 43; Jane Apostol, "From Salon to Soap Box: Kate Crane Gartz Parlor Provocateur," *Southern California Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (2007–8), 373–90.

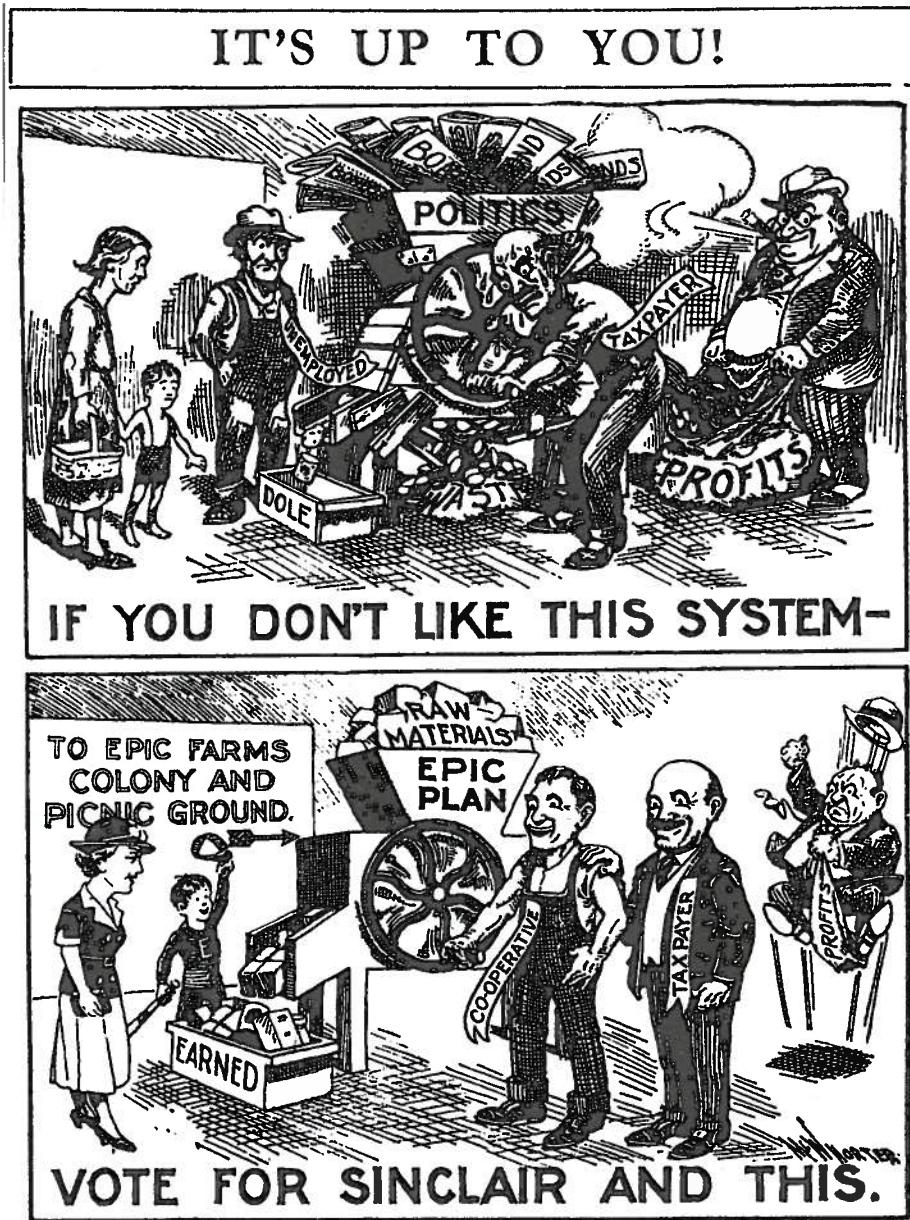


Figure 2. "If you don't like this system—vote for Sinclair and this." Upton Sinclair's *EPIC News*, June 18, 1934, 12

Yet the campaign was much more than a one-man show. Downey, candidate for lieutenant governor, was an effective campaigner as were several other EPIC nominees. A speaker's bureau supplied orators for meetings around the state, among them three famous former SP lecturers—Kate Richards O'Hare, J. Stitt Wilson, and Walter Mills. The newspaper was a key campaign tool. In localized editions, it was distributed by the hundreds of thousands as the primary approached, an estimated 10–15 million copies altogether during the campaign. Meanwhile, especially in Southern California, volunteers were busy with endless other projects. They "brought in so many new ideas that I didn't know what was going on," Sinclair later wrote. There were research units, women's clubs, youth clubs, drama groups, and EPIC softball teams; an EPIC chorus that performed at rallies, singing several different EPIC campaign songs; and a team that was planning a film. "I would come back from a speaking tour and be told that we had a play in rehearsal, or that I was to appear at a rodeo." These cultural productions show the creativity and energy that the campaign released. In June and July, volunteers organized a rodeo, two different plays, and an EPIC pageant demonstrating the lessons of production for use, performed by students from Pasadena's schools. Sinclair exaggerated not a bit when he called it a "mass movement."¹⁵

When the August 28 primary ballots were counted, Sinclair had defied even the most optimistic projections. He had received more votes than all of his Democratic opponents combined, 436,220 in all. The race was close in much of the state, and Creel won San Francisco, but Sinclair had overwhelmed all opposition in Los Angeles, collecting two-thirds of all Democratic votes. Standing with him in the general election would be Downey and forty-nine EPIC-endorsed candidates for the state legislature.¹⁶

The general election was a different story. Lieutenant Governor Frank Merriam had become governor just six months earlier upon the death of James Rolph. He was delighted to be facing Sinclair, probably the only Democrat he could hope to beat. The Republican campaign, said to be the dirtiest in California history, has been explored in detail: first by Sinclair in his postelection *I, Candidate for Governor of California and How I Got Licked* and more recently by Greg Mitchell in *Campaign of the Century*. The state's major newspapers, most of which had traditional ties to the Republican Party, had said little about Sinclair in the primary campaign. Now they poured it on, hitting him with a blizzard of scornful one-sided coverage.¹⁷

Sinclair proved to be an easy target. His earlier books yielded a rich harvest of damaging quotations. Typical of the coverage, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a daily

15. Sinclair, *I, Candidate*, 38. See *EPIC News*, esp. June, July, and August 1934 issues.

16. California Secretary of State, *Statement of Vote at Primary Election Held on August 28, 1934* (Sacramento: State Printing Office, 1934), 5–7; "45 EPIC Assemblymen Nominated in Primaries with Four Senate Seats," *EPIC News*, September 10, 1934, 3.

17. Dozens of cartoons and news articles can be viewed at the author's online project: Upton Sinclair's End Poverty in California Campaign, University of Washington, depts.washington.edu/epic34.

front-page column labeled "Sinclair Speaks," featuring excerpts from his earlier writings that revealed his hostility toward organized religion, his fascination with health fads, his controversial views on sex and marriage, and sympathetic statements he had once made about the Soviet Union.¹⁸

Hollywood joined the crusade. Threatening to move to Florida in the event of a Sinclair victory, the major studios raised a great deal of money for Frank Merriam. More important were the newsreels that soon appeared in theaters throughout the state. One featured an interview with a sweet older woman who said she was voting for Merriam because she did not want to lose her home. Interviewed next was a scruffy immigrant who announced in heavily accented voice that he was voting for Sinclair: "Vell, his system worked vell in Russia, vy can't it vork here?" Another fake newsreel had Hollywood extras dressed like hobos climbing off a freight train, having ostensibly come to California to participate in Sinclair's EPIC utopia.¹⁹

Sinclair responded as best he could, but he never regained the momentum of the primary campaign. He lost the support of much of the Democratic Party establishment. President Roosevelt declined to endorse him as did several of his primary-election opponents. Some prominent Democrats joined the much-publicized "Loyal League of Democrats" pledged to support the Republican Merriam. Fueling the defections were the Hearst newspapers—five of the largest-circulation newspapers in the state—owned by Democratic Party kingmaker and media mogul William Randolph Hearst. With so many enemies and so little access to major media outlets or the traditional Democratic Party networks, EPIC was doomed.²⁰

On November 6, Sinclair doubled his vote, receiving 879,537, but that was only 38 percent of the total. Frank Merriam won the election with 49 percent; 12 percent went to Raymond Haight, who had campaigned as a third-party alternative under the banner of the Progressive Party. It was not a complete loss. California voters had said yes to forty-one EPIC-endorsed candidates who would form an EPIC caucus in the new legislature. Heading to Washington were nine EPIC-backed members of Congress. And equally important, EPIC had captured key Democratic Party Central Committee posts, meaning that EPIC would now control much of the party machinery in the years ahead. Sinclair had lost, but the California Democratic Party was turning to the left.²¹

Voters

Who were these 879,537 Californians who lined up behind the EPIC program? And who were the activists who built this movement? I begin with geography and then will look at the demographic characteristics of Sinclair's supporters. EPIC was

18. "Sinclair Speaks" began appearing in the *Los Angeles Times* on September 15, 1934.

19. Sinclair, *Candidate*, 166–72; Mitchell, *Campaign of the Century*.

20. McIntosh, "Upton Sinclair," 227–28; 284–300.

21. California Secretary of State, *Statement of Vote in General Election on November 6, 1934* (Sacramento: State Printing Office, 1934), 5. McIntosh, "Upton Sinclair," 314.

wildly popular in some communities, equally unpopular in others. Table 1 (Appendix) shows the sixteen municipalities where Sinclair beat Merriam and Haight while securing at least 50 percent of the total vote. All but one of these were working-class communities in Los Angeles County or the San Francisco Bay Area. The industrial suburbs of Hawthorne and South Gate in the Southland (the greater Los Angeles area) gave him more than 60 percent of their votes, as did the steel town of South San Francisco. The table also lists the sixteen municipalities where Sinclair was so unpopular that he gained less than 21 percent of the votes cast. Two types of places are represented: enclaves of wealth like Beverly Hills, San Marino, and South Pasadena in Southern California and Piedmont in the Bay Area; and farming towns like Visalia, Riverside, and Red Bluff, where agribusiness leaders worried about Sinclair's land colony schemes and about the wave of farmworker strikes that had disrupted key harvests the previous year.

The table also shows the key geographic pattern of the vote. Sinclair did not do well outside the two major metropolitan areas: Los Angeles County and the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Area. He secured small pockets of support in some of the mountain counties where miners and timber workers struggled with high rates of unemployment and in railroad towns like Colton, Roseville, and Needles, but otherwise there was a sharp metropolitan-versus-nonmetropolitan division in the 1934 election results. Sinclair built much of his support in Los Angeles County. That single very populous county gave him 405,331 votes in the November election, 46 percent of his statewide total. He did not win in Los Angeles, but with 42 percent of the county's vote he did better there than in any other major county. San Francisco and Alameda (Oakland) counties gave Sinclair his next largest totals (87,850 and 73,233 votes) and also supported him at higher rates than the state average. In other regions, the movement gained little traction. Rural and small-city California heard little that was positive and much that was negative about Sinclair and his plans. Moreover, in California's Central Valley, Raymond Haight's candidacy proved a major obstacle. Backed by the McClatchy newspapers—the *Sacramento Bee*, *Fresno Bee*, and *Modesto Bee*—Haight won some Valley counties and nearly matched Sinclair's total for the Central Valley as a whole.

I have been able to explore some of the demographic characteristics of Sinclair's supporters using ecological inference techniques. The demographic information comes from aggregated census data for geographic areas. When variations in the population characteristics of these areas are statistically associated with variations in the vote, we obtain an indication of how particular segments of the population voted. Earlier attempts to evaluate voter backgrounds have been methodologically crude. They have looked for statistical associations in the distributions of votes aggregated at the county level, which are few in number (58) and provide insufficient variation. I am using two data sets, one consisting of 159 municipalities and unincorporated county areas; the other with more than 700 census tracts in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Alameda counties. Election results were reported by precincts, usually much smaller than census tracts, and frequently but not always contained within the tracts. Data

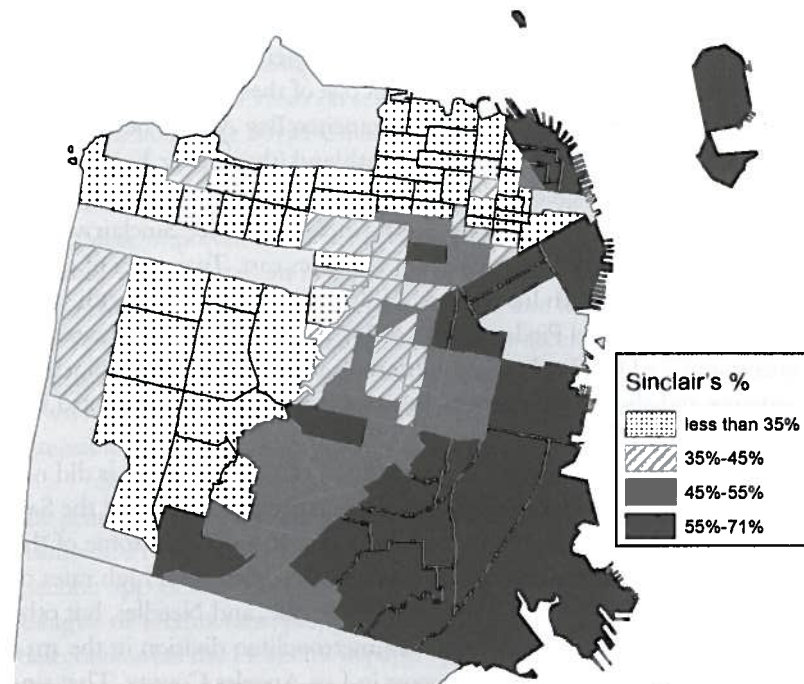


Figure 3. San Francisco County: Sinclair's percentage of the vote by census tract. Calculated from Precinct Reports, California Secretary of State, General Election, November 6, 1934. Map by the author

from more than 5,000 precincts in the three metropolitan counties are used in this analysis. There are uncertainties associated with these data. A detailed explanation of methods can be found at depts.washington.edu/epic34/anatomy.shtml. What follows is a summary of the key observations.²²

Figures 3, 4, and 5 map the distribution of votes by census tract for the three metropolitan counties. The black areas are tracts where Sinclair received 55 percent or more of votes cast in the November general election. Dark gray means that he won the tract with at least 45 percent of the vote. The lighter areas were won by Frank Merriam. In light crosshatch areas, Sinclair's total was between 35 percent and 45 percent, and in white dotted areas he received less than 35 percent of the votes cast.

In all three maps, there are strong indications that the vote broke along class lines. Sinclair won census tracts where males held mostly blue-collar jobs, housing

22. The analysis of voter demographics rests on datasets that combine precinct level 1934 election returns with 1940 census information for census tracts and municipalities. The election data are from county precinct reports, California Secretary of State, General Election November 6, 1934. The demographic data are from U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1940. *Population. Statistics by Census Tracts for Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oakland, San Francisco*, Tables 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 and U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1940. *Population. Vol 2*, Tables 21, 22, 23, 24, 30, 31, 32, 33. See website.

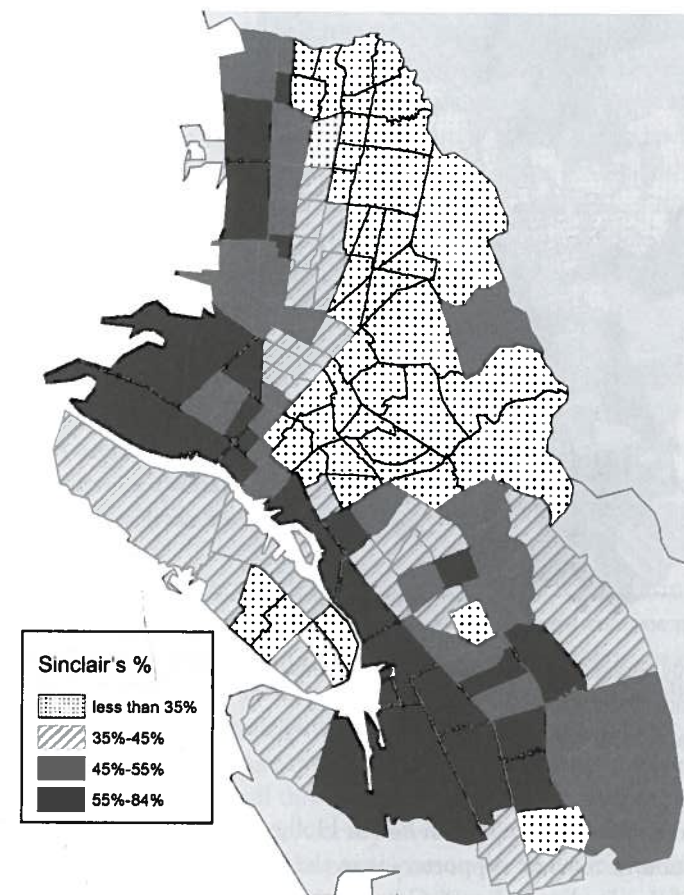


Figure 4. Alameda County: Sinclair's percentage of the vote by census tract. Calculated from Precinct Reports, California Secretary of State, General Election, November 6, 1934. Map by the author

costs were low, and adults on average had spent nine years in school. A sharp diagonal split San Francisco (figure 3) in the 1930s, with blue-collar families mostly living south of Market Street, in the Mission, outer Mission, and Visitacion Valley districts. Sinclair carried this entire area while doing poorly in the other half of the city. The blank areas on the map were military installations, parks, and a couple of neighborhoods for which data are lacking.

In Alameda County (figure 4), Sinclair won the districts near the bay in Albany, Berkeley, and west and south Oakland. All of these areas were predominantly white working-class neighborhoods in the 1930s.

The class pattern is also apparent in the map of Los Angeles County (figure 5). The black and grey areas near the center of the map are Boyle Heights and East LA, which were inhabited by eastern European Jews, Italians, and Mexicans,

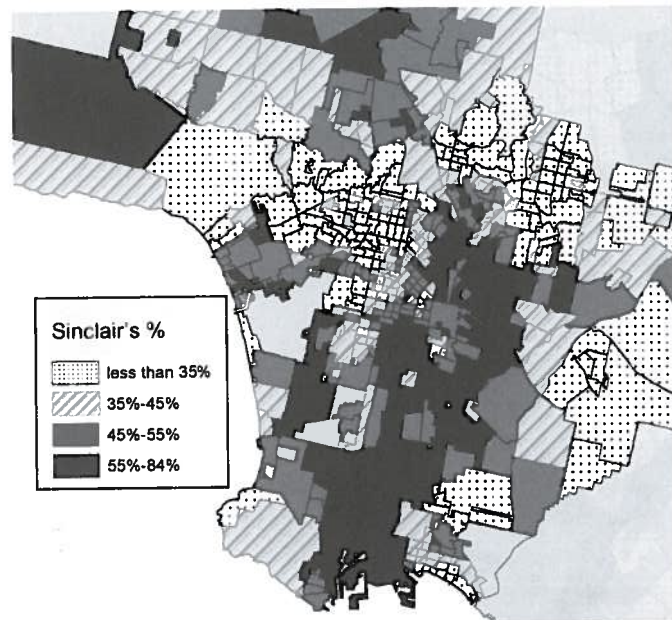


Figure 5. Los Angeles County: Sinclair's percentage of the vote by census tract. Calculated from Precinct Reports, California Secretary of State, General Election, November 6, 1934. Map by the author

and there is a clump of support above that in North Hollywood and Burbank. But the largest concentration of Sinclair supporters is in the line of industrial suburbs that stretched south of the city limits. South Gate, Torrance, Hawthorne, Huntington Park, Bell, Maywood, Compton, Signal Hill, north Long Beach—these were working-class communities sited near oil refineries, tire and automobile assembly plants, and aircraft, furniture, and other industrial concerns.²³

Using regression analysis, we can tease out further information about voting demography, weighing the significance of occupation, race, national origin, age, and gender. Table 2 (Appendix) shows standardized regression coefficients (Beta) associated with Sinclair's vote in the three counties. Notice first that there is a very strong association with the percentage of blue-collar males in the voting age population (.67, .82, .79), indicating that Sinclair captured a heavy majority of working-class male votes in each county and not very many white-collar votes.

Second, the regressions reveal a gender gap. The coefficients for adult females are modestly negative (-.18, -.20, -.24) when controlling for class, age, and ethnicity, indicating that women in all categories were on average less supportive than men. Class would still have been the most powerful predictor of the vote among women,

23. Becky M. Nicolaidis, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working Class Suburbs of Los Angeles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

but both working-class and middle-class women were less likely to support Sinclair than their male counterparts. This is curious. There was nothing in the EPIC program that was overtly alienating, and women were comparatively well represented in the leadership (see below). The vote may reflect a broader gender gap in political attachments in the early 1930s. Historians have not yet established whether both sexes were equally likely to join the great shift into the Democratic Party that made that party nationally dominant after 1932, but a small study of voting registration in one California county suggests that women were slower than men to switch from Republican to Democrat in the early 1930s.²⁴

Age mattered much less than gender. One of the long-standing assumptions about EPIC is that it was related in spirit and constituency to the other unorthodox political movements that emerged in Southern California during the early 1930s, including Dr. Francis Townsend's Old-Age Pension movement. Certainly there was considerable overlap in working-class households, but these data suggest that older voters of each class were no more likely than younger voters of the same class to support Sinclair.²⁵

I expected to see opposition to Sinclair in the African American communities, the most important of which was along Central Avenue in Los Angeles. With a population of just under fifty thousand, African Americans represented 2.5 percent of the eligible voters in Los Angeles County and much smaller fractions in the Bay Area counties.²⁶ Sinclair paid only slight attention to African Americans during the campaign. He did make overtures to Father Divine and in July announced that Dr. T. R. M. Howard "will direct the campaign among negro voters."²⁷ But he did not hold meetings in black LA or say anything publicly about how African Americans and other nonwhites might participate in the co-operative farms and factories that EPIC proposed. Sinclair's disregard reflected the casual racism he shared with most white Californians and the assumption that most African Americans would remain loyal to the party of Lincoln. He seems to have done better than expected. The Los Angeles equation shows a small lean away from Sinclair when other variables are controlled. I examined thirteen census tracts where African Americans were in the majority. Sinclair won three of them, and the vote was close in three others. That Sinclair did as well as he did had much to do with the energetic campaign of Augustus Hawkins, a twenty-seven-year-old real estate broker who ran for the state assembly with EPIC support. Hawkins won, becoming the first African American Democrat

24. Dewey Anderson and Percy E. Davidson, *Ballots and the Democratic Class Struggle: A Study in the Background of Political Education* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1943), 64.

25. The fact that Dr. Townsend refused to endorse EPIC may have been a factor. Jackson K. Putnam, *Old-Age Politics in California from Richardson to Reagan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1970).

26. Calculated from 1930 sample: Steven Ruggles et. al., *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0* (machine-readable database) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010).

27. "Negro Leader," *EPIC News*, July 16, 1934, 15; Sinclair letter to Father Divine, June 19, 1934, Sinclair MSS. Correspondence, box 26, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.

elected to the legislature. He would hold that seat for twenty-eight years before winning election to Congress, where he would serve for another twenty-eight years.²⁸

Estimating the voting patterns of other ethnic populations is complicated by data issues. What follows is based on some challengeable assumptions and must be viewed cautiously. Ethnic Mexicans numbered more than 180,000 in Los Angeles County at the start of the 1930s, but only 27,000 were citizens of voting age. We learn little about their preferences from the regression equation. The coefficient is tiny and not statistically significant.²⁹

It is something of a surprise that Italian Americans seem to have voted along class lines instead of against Sinclair. At the time of the election it was widely believed that Republican characterizations of Sinclair as an atheist and communist had cost him votes among Catholics. There is no sign of that in the regression equations. Italians leaned in favor of Sinclair in Los Angeles, but there were no statistically significant influences in the Bay Area. That probably means they voted along class lines. Notice on figure 3 that the largely Italian North Beach section of San Francisco gave Sinclair a majority of its votes.³⁰

Sinclair did very well in Boyle Heights, the east LA neighborhood that had a substantial Jewish population. Since the census does not record information about religious affiliations, I used Russian birthplace as a stand-in. Not all Russians in California were Jewish, but it is likely that the majority were. If the Russian variable is valid, Jews did show a clear preference for Sinclair in Los Angeles. The positive coefficient (.17) suggests that some white-collar as well as blue-collar Jews voted for EPIC. Merriam's voters were essentially the opposite of Sinclair's (Table 2). He did poorly with blue-collar voters and very well with white-collar voters. He lost Jewish support, shared with Sinclair the support of older voters, and gained an edge with women. In contrast, supporters of third-party candidate Raymond Haight appear to have lacked consistent demographic characteristics. None of the independent variables are statistically associated with his votes. It is best to assume that Haight's small vote totals in the three metropolitan counties came from a mix of social strata.

Nonmetropolitan Areas

The sharp class patterns in Los Angeles County and the Bay Area disappear in other areas of the state. Not only did support for Sinclair drop precipitously outside the major metropolitan areas, he also seems to have lost his key demographic association with blue-collar voters. Using a second data set comprising 159 municipalities

and unincorporated county areas, I tested a similar list of demographic variables. In Table 3 (Appendix) there is a slightly positive association with male working-class occupations (0.12 standardized coefficient), but it fails the test of statistical significance. Nor are there statistically significant ethnic, age, or gender patterns in the rural areas and small cities of the state. These findings remind us of the importance of context and the fact that successful political campaigns depend upon elaborate infrastructures of persuasion and mobilization. Newspapers and political parties are two important components, along with specialized interest groups that can deliver money, media access, and campaign volunteers. In addition, electoral campaigns depend upon activists—either party regulars or in some cases new cohorts of volunteers—who will do the hard work of spreading the word, canvassing support, and getting voters to the polls. As an outsider to the Democratic Party who had thrust himself into the electoral arena with a novel and radical program, Sinclair had to build all of this from the ground up. The newspapers and party networks that might have aided a more conventional Democratic Party candidate were not available to him; and he also had some trouble gaining the support of a key potential ally, organized labor. EPIC was mostly on its own, a grass-roots campaign that would create its own media, its own campaign offices, and its own army of dedicated volunteers. And here is where geography comes into play. Because of regional differences in political history and infrastructure, it was easiest to build that campaign network in the Southland, somewhat more difficult in the Bay Area, and very difficult in the nonmetropolitan counties.³¹

In the nonmetropolitan areas, EPIC faced a number of obstacles. Distance and logistics for one thing. Sinclair lived in Pasadena and refused to spend much time campaigning outside the LA area. He made five trips north, giving most of his speeches in the Bay Area, depending upon supporters to campaign in the smaller cities.³² EPIC clubs formed in nearly all of the nonmetropolitan counties, but it was harder for them to get *EPIC News* bundles and other campaign materials in a timely manner and harder to generate the mass enthusiasm that the campaign recorded in the Southland and Bay Area. This had something to do with the position of radicals and progressive Republicans in these areas. Socialists, communists, and other radicals living in rural counties were more isolated and more persecuted than their counterparts in the big cities, especially after the 1933 wave of communist-led farm strikes had ended in a massive crackdown and criminal syndicalist prosecutions.³³

If the left was preoccupied, so were progressive Republicans, who, particularly in the Central Valley, rallied behind Haight under the Progressive Party banner.

28. Douglas Flammig, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in the Jim Crow Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 313–19.

29. For data challenges see depts.washington.edu/epic34/anatomy.shtml. *EPIC News* discussed the plight of Mexicans in LA in its May 28, 1934, issue and later announced that "Spanish speaker Thomas Raphael is now available" (August 13, 1934, 5).

30. I have found an EPIC leaflet printed in Italian by Marcellino Caputo, Chairman of EPIC's Italian-American Central State Committee, Upton Sinclair Miscellaneous Uncatalogued Materials Collection, box 6, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.

31. The EPIC campaign fits the definition of a "flanking move" in the formula proposed by Gary Miller and Alan Schofield, but that term also may underplay the significance of the EPIC invasion of the California Democratic Party. Gary Miller and Alan Schofield, "Activists and Party Realignment," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 2 (2003): 245–60.

32. McIntosh, "Upton Sinclair," 139.

33. Devra Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farmworkers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

Haight's strength in this region was due to the endorsement he received from the Central Valley's most powerful newspaper chain, the McClatchy-owned *Sacramento Bee*, *Fresno Bee*, and *Modesto Bee*. The *Bees* had long been a key part of the coalition that had stood behind Hiram Johnson and progressive Republicans for more than twenty years. In 1934, unable to stomach the conservatism of Merriam or the radicalism of Sinclair, the McClatchy family endorsed and campaigned vigorously for Haight. The newspapers' influence is easily seen in the vote. In each of the six counties within a fifty-mile circulation range of one of the three *Bees*, the third-party candidate outpolled Sinclair, and in two of them he also beat Merriam.³⁴

Political Opportunity

There were differences too in the pattern of response to EPIC in the two major metropolitan zones, although commentators have probably exaggerated them. As we have seen, EPIC attracted largely working-class support in both the Southland and the Bay Area. Still, the movement began in LA; it was LA that secured Sinclair's overwhelming primary victory, while the primary vote was closely divided between Creel and Sinclair in the Bay Area; and it was widely evident that the EPIC fire burned brightest in the LA area. Why?

This question has fed key misreadings of the movement. Creel, McWilliams, and others have overemphasized the differences and fastened on the idea that Southern California was a land of disoriented newcomers, that it had a population that was newer and less socially stable than the Bay Area and thus more easily drawn to quixotic political schemes. The newcomer thesis was true enough. Most residents, including the majority of working-class residents, had come to Southern California during the 1920s, joining the great job and housing boom that spread Los Angeles across a vast suburban landscape and more than doubled the population of both the city and the county. This new Southern California working class was also ethnically different from its counterpart in most big cities, including the Bay Area. In San Francisco and Oakland, the working class had large representations of Catholics and immigrants from various European nations. In 1930, 34 percent of blue-collar males in San Francisco were European-born immigrants, and many others were second-generation immigrants, their birthplaces either California or the northeastern United States. In Los Angeles, less than 16 percent were European born, and few (8 percent) claimed a California birthplace. Nine percent had Mexican backgrounds, but the typical birthplace for blue-collar males in LA was the Midwest or South (45 percent). This was a mostly Protestant working class, and many were relatively new to cities and industrial jobs.³⁵

Because so many were recent settlers and because this was a different kind of population from that of most other cities, analysts have been too ready to see EPIC as

34. Secretary of State, *Statement of Vote in General Election*.

35. Calculated from the 1930 data in Ruggles et. al., *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series*.

a manifestation of Depression-era disorientation. A distressed population turned to an extreme and chimerical scheme, the McWilliams argument goes, where a more rooted population would have been less desperate and more pragmatic.

This overly psychologized view limits our understanding of how politics works and how political attachments are formed. A better explanation focuses on institutions and takes some cues from political opportunity theory. Political opportunity theory calls attention to institutional and social context, stressing that social movements are most likely to surge when there are not just grievances but also opportunities in the form of breakdowns or gaps in political institutions and when resources (including potential leaders, activists, organizational allies, funding, and other support) are available to help the movement grow.³⁶

My argument is this: The EPIC movement benefited from the institutional geography of working-class Los Angeles that offered rare opportunities for new political initiatives, and, accordingly, the movement was able to draw upon a talented leadership that might not have been available in a more conventional political environment and was also able to draw the attention of blue-collar families who in other settings might have had conflicting political commitments. What follows is a brief sketch of the argument and a statistical portrait of the EPIC leadership cohort that seems to fit the theory.

As mentioned earlier, the Democratic Party had very shallow roots throughout California, especially in the Southland. Until 1932, when the Roosevelt tidal wave carried the state, sweeping into congressional and state legislative office a cohort of Democrats, the party had almost no patronage or infrastructure outside San Francisco, where a Catholic-linked party faction was based. William Gibbs McAdoo had plans to change that. The newly elected US senator, who had been Woodrow Wilson's Treasury Secretary (and son-in-law), planned to rebuild the party using the patronage positions that accompanied the federal funds that began flowing into the state in mid-1933. But the party-building project was just getting started when Sinclair launched his EPIC challenge. Especially in Los Angeles, which in 1933 elected yet another Republican mayor, experienced Democratic politicians and party resources were virtually nonexistent. Sinclair was filling a vacuum.³⁷

Not only was there little Democratic Party infrastructure to draw on or get in his way in LA, other forces that might have competed for working-class attention were also largely absent. Organized labor, an important political force in San Francisco for half a century, was much weaker in Los Angeles. Unions had been sidelined

36. Doug McAdam, "Political Opportunities, Conceptual Origins, Current Problems, Future Directions," in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, ed. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer Wald (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 23-40; David S. Meyer and Debra Minkoff, "Conceptualizing Political Opportunity," *Social Forces* 82, no. 4 (2004): 1457-92.

37. Delmatier, "Rebirth of the Democratic Party"; Thomas Joseph Sitton, "Urban Politics and Reform in New Deal Los Angeles: The Recall of Mayor Frank L. Shaw" (PhD diss., University of California, Riverside, 1983).

throughout the 1920s and further diminished in the early years of the Depression. In 1933, the Central Labor Council (CLC) and its component unions represented a mere eleven thousand members out of a city population of 1.2 million.³⁸

The CLCs in both San Francisco and Los Angeles ignored Sinclair through the primary campaign but for different reasons. Led by John W. Buzzell, the Los Angeles CLC was cautious to the point of conservatism, anxious to hold onto city government and electrical utility jobs and the small measure of influence it had won in the election that brought Republican Frank Shaw into the mayor's office in 1933. The more powerful San Francisco CLC was dealing with internal divisions in 1934 and preoccupied with the historic waterfront strike that had begun in May and had turned into a four-day general strike in July. Neither CLC offered an endorsement in the August primary election. Constituent unions in both cities had gone in different directions, some endorsing Sinclair, some Creel, many offering no recommendation.³⁹

After Sinclair's stunning primary victory, the State Federation of Labor voted to endorse him.⁴⁰ But even then top leaders remained cautious, and the AFL unions put few resources into the election. *The Los Angeles Citizen*, representing the city's CLC, waited until its November 2 edition to come out with a strong endorsement, finally signaling in its headline that "Sinclair Will Be for All the People; Do Your Duty and Vote Labor's Ticket."⁴¹

Lacking both an effective Democratic Party and an imposing labor movement, the political world of working-class Los Angeles also lacked a Communist Party (CP) capable of gaining widespread attention or able to disrupt the nascent EPIC movement. The communists, still committed to Third Period revolutionary sectarianism, attacked Sinclair, claiming that the EPIC plan "would in effect amount to penal colonies for the unemployed" and charging that Sinclair "is pulling the wool over our eyes."⁴² The criticism mattered more in the Bay Area than in Los Angeles, reflecting party strength and the differing political infrastructures of the two areas.

38. Richard N. Baisden, "Labor Unions in Los Angeles Politics" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1958), 105. For a broader picture of working-class politics, see John H. M. Laslett, *Sunshine Was Never Enough: Los Angeles Workers, 1880-2010* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); and Louis B. Perry and Richard S. Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 1911-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963).

39. See articles in the *Los Angeles Citizen*, July 27, 1934, 1, 3, 5; August 3, 1934, 2, 3, 6; August 24, 1934, 2; August 31, 1934, 2; September 7, 1934, 1.

40. *Los Angeles Citizen*, September 28, 1934, 1.

41. "Voters to Decide Tuesday between Vested Interests and Human Rights" (no author) *Los Angeles Citizen*, November 2, 1934; Baisden, "Labor Unions," 129-30.

42. Communist Party District 13, *Sinclair—Will His Plan Work?* September 30, 1934, 11, in Samuel Darcy Papers, box 2, folder 37, Tamiment Library, New York University; Robert Cherny, "Prelude to the Popular Front: The Communist Party in California, 1931-35," *American Communist History* 1, no. 1 (2002): 5-42; the most detailed account of the Communist Party in Los Angeles is an unpublished study graciously shared with the author: Howard Furmanovsky, "Lost Chances and New Possibilities: The EPIC Movement and the United Front, 1934-35."

At the end of 1933, there were almost twice as many dues-paying party members in the Bay Area (806) as in the more populous Southern California region (444).⁴³

The party struggled with two problems in LA. One was the Red Squad, a unit of the police department that viciously hounded the CP, breaking up street demonstrations, arresting party members, and not infrequently pursuing felony charges. The second challenge was geography. The enormous expanse of working-class LA, where the city itself covered five hundred square miles and the county almost five thousand, meant that even a much bigger party was going to have trouble making an impression. The effects of geography were especially pronounced in 1934 because the CP concentrated energies on the waterfront, promoting the longshore strike that closed ports up and down the coast from May through July of that year. In the water-surrounded geography of San Francisco and Oakland-Alameda, where maritime trade dominated the economy, the strike was an all-consuming event. But for much of Los Angeles, it was distant news, important mostly in San Pedro harbor, twenty-five miles from downtown LA. The fact that the strike was less successful in San Pedro than in SF compounded the differences. Whereas in the Bay Area communists were influential enough to keep many radical activists from initially joining EPIC, in the Southland the Sinclair movement faced little competition.

These absences opened the way for Sinclair to capture the attention of working-class LA in the spring and summer of 1934 and to draw upon energy, talent, and other resources that otherwise might not have been available to a socialist renegade bent on taking over the Democratic Party. One of the resources was the *Illustrated Daily News*, the only progressive large-circulation daily newspaper in the region. Publisher Manchester Boddy was a liberal Democrat committed to economic reform. His paper vigorously supported Roosevelt, and Boddy was also interested in proposals that went beyond the early New Deal. In the years before EPIC, the paper publicized the Technocracy movement and other innovative and radical ideas. Reaching more than eighty thousand households, the fourth-largest circulation in the county, the *Illustrated Daily News* helped Sinclair spread the word about EPIC in the early phases of the campaign. Ultimately, Boddy turned against Sinclair, disappointing the candidate and many others when he published a critical statement as the primary approached; but that mattered less than the earlier encouraging coverage.⁴⁴ On November 14, 1933, a full year before the election, *Illustrated Daily News* columnist C. H. Garrigues explained why Sinclair would do so well in Los Angeles, citing the kind of political vacuum I have been emphasizing. "Except for Sinclair, the old parties will have little to offer the Roosevelt supporters and the unemployed," he wrote, calling the likely Democratic candidates "old dealish." "That gives Sinclair his chance.

43. *Monthly Handbook for Functionaries District 13 CPUSA*, December 1933, 4, in Files of the Communist Party of the USA in the Comintern Archives (New York: IDC Publishers, n.d.) (hereafter Files of the CP), delo 3299, reel 254.

44. Manchester Boddy editorial, *Illustrated Daily News*, June 15, 1934, clipping in Socialist Party Scrapbooks, vol. 4, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

The voters can support him, remain democrats and still support the president, while getting a program which is somewhat more attuned to the needs of the forgotten man than even Roosevelt's program."⁴⁵

Sinclair was also able to draw support and talent from two organizations that were falling apart in late 1933 and whose activist cadres (or many of them) were readily lured into the EPIC campaign. One was Sinclair's own Socialist Party. The SP was disintegrating in California even before Sinclair announced his EPIC move. Norman Thomas's 1932 campaign for president had sparked a revival, but after his disappointing showing, many SP members drifted away, some joining the CP, which proudly signed up nearly 250 former Socialists in 1933.⁴⁶ EPIC claimed the rest, as we will see.

The other was the region's self-help cooperative movement, which had exploded across the working-class suburbs of Los Angeles County in 1932. Similar in form to the Unemployed Citizens League in Seattle, the self-help clubs were organized by unemployed men and women who gathered neighbors together to exchange labor for surplus food and other goods. The first club was initiated by army veterans in the working-class suburb of Compton who worked out an arrangement with nearby Japanese American farmers to harvest and share surplus produce in exchange for labor. The club grew rapidly as the barter formula was accepted by other farmers and also by trucking companies. Soon other clubs were being organized, some of them moving from barter to cooperative production, growing their own produce, organizing bakeries, barber shops, clothing production, construction units, and repair units. Friendly property owners allowed some units to operate out of empty storefronts or warehouses. Economist Clark Kerr studied the movement as it developed, recording that there were 115 clubs operating in Los Angeles County in June 1933 with more than 23,000 members.⁴⁷ Sinclair also watched. The self-help movement provided the inspiration for his EPIC system of state-run cooperatives.

The co-op movement helped in a second way as the EPIC campaign gained momentum. It had been a training ground for organizers, some of whom brought their skills into EPIC. Each of the co-ops had been organized from below, sometimes by men and women of little experience, sometimes by individuals who were skilled in the arts of persuasion, negotiation, and public speaking. In early 1933, many of the co-ops joined together to create the Unemployed Cooperative Relief Association (UCRA) to facilitate product exchange and to lobby local and state governments for funds. Obtaining government assistance became a principal focus from 1933 on, and as it did, the co-op movement began to lose momentum. It did not help that the CP was sending followers to the co-op meetings in an effort to capitalize on the move-

45. C. H. Garrigues, "The Spotlight," *Illustrated Daily News*, November 14, 1933.

46. Letter from Sam Darcy to Central Committee of Communist Party, December 13, 1933, Files of the CP, delo 3295, reel 254. Furmanovsky, "Lost Chances," 5-9.

47. Clark Kerr, "Productive Enterprises of the Unemployed, 1931-1938" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1938), vol. 2, 75, table 8. Also see McIntosh, "Upton Sinclair," 77-83; Laura Renata Martin, "California's Unemployed Feed Themselves: Conservative Intervention in the Los Angeles Cooperative Movement, 1931-1934," *Pacific Historical Review* 82, no. 1 (2013), 33-62.

ment. As 1933 turned into 1934, some of the veterans of the co-ops were ready to try something else. Edward S. Tebbutt, for one. Manager of the nine-hundred-member Hollywood Cooperative Exchange, he wrote to Sinclair early in 1934 noting that the exchange was falling apart and volunteering his services to help the EPIC cause.⁴⁸

EPIC Leadership

We collected information on 292 EPIC activists, men and women who ran for seats in the legislature, managed campaign offices, and served as district secretaries or EPIC club leaders (Table 4). These data complicate the profile of the EPIC movement. Whereas the movement's supporters were overwhelmingly working class, that was not true of the leaders. Indeed, looking at the occupational backgrounds of the leadership cohort, we start to see why McWilliams and other critics concluded that EPIC was a movement that appealed to the disoriented middle class.

The leadership sample of 292 includes 239 men and women who were identified in the *EPIC News* as club chairs, assembly district leaders, or leaders in charge of one of the eighteen campaign headquarters around the state and another 53 who ran as candidates for the legislature. Using city directories and voting registration records, we found occupational information on more than two-thirds of these leaders. We have no information about employment at the time of the campaign; many may have been unemployed and thus able to volunteer their time to the movement.

Of the 201 for whom there is occupational information, only 16 percent had blue-collar jobs or skills and another 13 percent were housewives or retired, while 70 percent claimed white-collar occupations. Fully one-third had professional-sector skills, if not necessarily jobs, at the time of the campaign, including attorneys (11 percent), writers, clergy, engineers, and teachers. Thirteen percent had owned or managed businesses of some sort, mostly building contractors and store owners. Another 24 percent had held sales or office jobs, including a large number of real estate or insurance brokers. Among the small cohort of blue-collar workers, most were skilled tradesmen, including carpenters, electricians, painters, and machinists. Women held forty-six of the leadership positions (16 percent). They included a doctor, two attorneys, three nurses, two real estate agents, a teacher, a writer, and eighteen who were identified as housewives in the city directories.

Table 5 (Appendix) separates the candidates who ran for seats in the legislature or statewide office in the August primary from the rest of the leadership group. One of the candidates, Hawkins—who would go on to a storied career in the US Congress—was African American; four were women; the rest were white men. We identified the occupations of forty-four of the candidates. Sixty-one percent of the candidates were professional class, including eighteen attorneys. Only 7 percent of the candidates were known to have blue-collar occupations, and none of the candidates was identified as a housewife or retired. Those categories accounted for 35 percent of the club leadership sample.

48. Edward S. Tebbutt letter to Upton Sinclair, January 30, 1934, in Sinclair Correspondence, box 25.

Most of the EPIC leaders were newcomers to the Democratic Party, which was true of most Californians. We found voting registration records for 136 of the club leaders and candidates (Table 6, Appendix). Only 26 percent had been registered Democrats two years earlier, in the 1932 election. Fifty-seven percent had registered Republican that year. Nine percent had registered with the SP or the left-wing Liberty Party in 1932, and a similar number had registered as independents or declined to state a party preference that year. That means that three-quarters of the leadership cohort were, like the candidate himself, new Democrats, registering with the party for the first time in 1934. There is nothing surprising about this. California had been Republican country until Roosevelt's 1932 victory, and progressives were likely to have been Republicans at the time of that election.

While McWilliams and others might see these backgrounds as symptoms of disorientation, the backgrounds also fit the thesis that EPIC attracted a surge of activists from social locations and with skills that left-wing movements generally had not seen before. The large number of professionals and men and women with sales and office experience helps us understand the creative campaign tactics and the highly effective local organizing that won EPIC so much support in working-class neighborhoods in the metropolitan counties.

These middle-class activists were drawn into the movement by a variety of concerns, including personal ambition. For George Acret, lifelong progressive Republican and formerly a district attorney in Washington State, EPIC offered a return to politics. He volunteered to run for the state supreme court. He might have been just as happy running as a New Deal Democrat, but in 1934 EPIC was opening doors that the regular Democrats could not and attracting idealistic and opportunistic outsiders like Acret.⁴⁹ That was also the case for Will Kindig, an accountant and real estate developer. Before the collapse, he had been manager of Palos Verdes estates, an elite enclave overlooking the Pacific Ocean. He still owned property for which there was no market, but now he had time on his hands and was ready to pour his energies into politics, supporting Sinclair. Kindig proved invaluable. His connections helped EPIC gain a radio outlet and other resources. His accounting background led Sinclair to trust him with campaign financial matters, and later Kindig agreed to run for the statewide office of controller after Sinclair realized that he had the combination of necessary skills and proven loyalty. Kindig is an example of the kind of person who in other circumstances might not be joining a radical political campaign. "The Sinclair plan dawned upon me as an opportunity from Heaven to do what I think is best for our whole population," he explained.⁵⁰

49. George Acret to Sinclair, June 1, 1934, box 26, and Acret to A. A. Heist, July 27, 1934, box 27, Sinclair Correspondence.

50. "EPIC Campaign Body Endorses Kindig, Shontz," *EPIC News*, June 25, 1934; Sinclair, *I, Candidate*, 42-43.

Some of those who stepped forward were more opportunistic than idealistic. For Leland Fogg, who had watched his Pasadena insurance business evaporate, the decision to become active in the campaign was tempered by business motives. At one point he suggested that EPIC develop an insurance sideline, an idea Sinclair rejected.⁵¹ Sinclair fended off several other self-serving schemes and remained wary of potential charlatans throughout the campaign.⁵² But if some of this talent came with strings, the point to emphasize is that the campaign managed to attract an impressive number of attorneys, engineers, teachers, salespeople, and others with skills and connections that proved valuable.

Socialists appear from this leadership sample to have made up less than 10 percent of the movement's activists. This may understate the importance of former radicals. Sinclair's top advisors (not part of the sample) included a number of former Socialists, among them John Packard and Ernest Untermeyer, prominent national SP leaders. *EPIC News* editor Reuben Burough had been a party member. As noted above, O'Hare, Wilson, and Mills, well-known SP lecturers, gave speeches and radio talks for the campaign.⁵³

Socialists were less frequently represented among the local-level leaders who took charge of the assembly districts and EPIC clubs. Only two Socialists, Jerry Voorhis and Marion Wotherspoon, became candidates for the legislature on the EPIC slate. This was deliberate, Sinclair reported in his memoir. The campaign was trying to counter the impression that "ours was a Socialist ticket in disguise."⁵⁴ But in less visible roles, former Socialists were very active. Hundreds left the SP, entranced by what future Congressman Voorhis declared was "the nearest thing to a mass movement toward Socialism that I have heard in America."⁵⁵

We get a sense of the important behind-the-scenes role of former Socialists from an ethnographic account of political activity in North Hollywood, a community situated in the San Fernando Valley and one of the few white-collar areas to vote for Sinclair. A quiet Republican suburb before the 1930s, North Hollywood had come alive with alternative politics by 1934, according to Unda Hamren, who conducted the study for her MA degree at the University of Southern California. She reported that on some nights a drive through residential areas would reveal meeting after meeting under way, sometimes two or three in a single block. And behind much of this activism, she discovered, was "a patient persevering little group" of former Socialists. Numbering not more than forty members, they had their hands in everything, from Technocracy to the co-ops, the Utopian Society, and of course, EPIC. They even worked their way into the American Legion post and turned that organization away from its conservative leaders. Sympathetic and perhaps a member of the group

51. Sinclair to Leland Fogg, March 26, 1934, Sinclair Correspondence, box 26.

52. Sinclair, *I, Candidate*, 26-27.

53. *Ibid.*, 27; Leader, "Upton Sinclair's EPIC Switch."

54. Sinclair, *I, Candidate*, 54.

55. Leader, "Upton Sinclair's EPIC Switch," 373.

herself, Hamren labeled the former Socialists a "rallying point" for public-opinion formation.⁵⁶

EPIC Opportunities

What was distinctive and important about EPIC was that it harvested the talents of veteran radicals like those in North Hollywood and also of thousands of individuals who were new to the Left, who volunteered because it was not quite a socialist movement and because it operated under the umbrella of the Democratic Party. This had a lot to do with the reputation and brilliance of Sinclair, but, as I have emphasized, it was also a product of political absences and political opportunities that created openings for this innovative movement.

The EPIC campaign helps us understand the possibilities and limits of radical politics in the early stages of the New Deal. Sinclair had hit upon a powerful strategy, abandoning the idea of an independent socialist or radical party, moving instead to take over the Democratic Party using primary elections, a strategy since employed by the Tea Party movement with the Republican Party. In doing so, he demonstrated an ability to win votes on a scale the SP had never managed, gaining almost as many in one state as the SP in its heyday had won nationwide and winning widespread support for a radical program in working-class households that had no history of radical politics. Does this allow us to make generalized statements about the political sensibilities of the American working class? Should we take up again the old question of whether workers were radical or mostly pragmatic? Probably not. Searching for singular assessments of the mindset or ideological dispositions of workers or other broad categories of the public is a mistake that pollsters make but historians should avoid. Instead, this analysis encourages us to think situationally, recognizing that political movements are not just a matter of shared beliefs and values but also depend upon organization, strategy, and implementation, on effective communication and effective leadership. And they depend upon political openings.

Would the EPIC strategy of trying to invade and control the Democratic Party have been effective on a national level? It was effective in Oregon and Washington, the two states where EPIC-linked campaigns were launched in 1934. Indeed, in Washington the strategy resulted in victories in congressional and legislative races and, more importantly, in the creation of a lasting organization—the Washington Commonwealth Federation (WCF)—that would function for the next decade and a half as a formal caucus within the state Democratic Party, choosing candidates, winning primaries, and forcing that party to deal with an organized Left long after California's EPIC organization had disappeared.⁵⁷

56. Unda Irene Hamren, "A Study of North Hollywood, California in an Attempt to Discover Some of the Changes in Public Opinion That Have Occurred from 1930–1939" (Master's thesis, University of Southern California, 1939), esp. 29.

57. There is more on End Poverty in Washington and the WCF at the author's online Upton Sinclair's End Poverty in California Campaign, depts.washington.edu/epic34. Also see Albert Acena, "The Washington Commonwealth Federation: Reform Politics and the Popular Front" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1975).

But the strategy depended upon political opportunities that were not widely available. One was the ability of radicals to create effective state-level organizations independent of the Socialist, Communist, and Farmer-Labor Parties. Although tens of thousands of veteran radicals were disillusioned with the older organizations, most clung to the hope of creating an independent radical party. Sinclair's strategy drew widespread criticism in radical and progressive publications right up until his stunning primary victory. By then it was usually too late to emulate his campaign. In the years ahead, most leftists would work with Democrats in one way or another, but the chance to create EPIC-like organizations within the party had disappeared. There had been a window of opportunity in 1934 when the New Deal had not yet dented unemployment and had not yet shown its progressive potential. It closed quickly. The other limiting factor was the shape of the Democratic Party in various states. The invasion strategy probably worked best in western states that had been one-party Republican strongholds before the 1930s and where Democratic parties were organizationally underdeveloped.⁵⁸

So the EPIC story reminds us to consider political geography and the institutional context of particular places in particular times. It also invites us to think about political strategies in more recent times. The first years of the Great Recession raised expectations of a changed political environment, one that might echo the dynamics of the 1930s. But instead of an insurgent Left, the Right captured much of the initiative, creating challenges for the Obama administration very different than those faced by Roosevelt. It is instructive that the Right, not the Left, saw what Upton Sinclair saw: that sometimes there are opportunities for pushing one of the major parties aggressively by creating formal caucuses and using primary elections to change the agenda. As President Obama looks back, does he wish he had had an Upton Sinclair? ■

58. The League for Independent Political Action and its successor, the magazine *Common Sense*, looked for strategies independent of the SP and CP but remained committed to independent radical parties. Later, the CIO's Labor Nonpartisan League and the American Labor Party of New York adopted quasi-independent approaches that allowed them to work with Democrats but not as a caucus within the party.

Appendix

For detail about data and methods, visit depts.washington.edu/epic34/anatomy.shtml.

Table 1: Towns, cities, and regions where Sinclair won the most and the least votes in the November 1934 gubernatorial election

Municipality	County	Sinclair's %	Sinclair's vote	Municipality	County	Sinclair's %	Sinclair's vote
Sinclair's best: wins with at least 50% of vote				Sinclair's worst: less than 21% of vote			
Belvedere township	Los Angeles	70%	3,738	Placerville	El Dorado	20%	271
Hawthorne	Los Angeles	64%	1,899	Orange	Orange	20%	727
Maywood	Los Angeles	62%	1,851	Riverside	Riverside	20%	2,587
South San Francisco	San Mateo	61%	1,186	Oakdale	Stanislaus	20%	182
Lynwood	Los Angeles	61%	2,173	Visalia	Tulare	19%	609
South Gate	Los Angeles	61%	5,278	Healdsburg	Sonoma	18%	193
Needles	San Bernardino	55%	475	Red Bluff	Tehama	18%	303
Daly City	San Mateo	55%	1,846	South Pasadena	Los Angeles	18%	1,300
Bell	Los Angeles	55%	1,943	Glendora	Los Angeles	18%	206
El Cerrito	Contra Costa	54%	1,173	Upland	San Bernardino	17%	356
Pittsburg	Contra Costa	53%	1,720	Auburn	Placer	16%	232
Signal Hill	Los Angeles	53%	663	Woodland	Yolo	13%	349
Inglewood	Los Angeles	52%	5,100	Beverly Hills	Los Angeles	13%	1,220
Gardena	Los Angeles	52%	980	Piedmont	Alameda	10%	492
Compton	Los Angeles	50%	2,772	San Marino	Los Angeles	6%	144
Culver City	Los Angeles	50%	1,415	Hillsborough	San Mateo	5%	45
Sinclair's vote by state regions				Sinclair's vote in largest cities			
Los Angeles County		42%	495,331	Los Angeles	Los Angeles	43%	226,807
Other Southern California counties		34%	80,855	San Francisco	San Francisco	39%	87,850
Bay Area counties		37%	231,553	Oakland	Alameda	41%	46,677
Central Valley counties		31%	101,394				
Coast counties		32%	42,734				
Mountain counties		33%	16,742				

Source: County precinct reports, California Secretary of State, General Election November 6, 1934.

Table 2: Regression analysis of percentage of vote for Sinclair, Merriam, Haight in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Alameda counties, 1934 California gubernatorial election

	Los Angeles County (n=516)		San Francisco County (n=109)		Alameda County (n=112)	
	Beta	(SE)	Beta	(SE)	Beta	(SE)
Sinclair's % of vote						
<i>Independent variables:</i>						
% blue-collar males	0.67	(.07)**	0.82	(.09)**	0.79	(.12)**
% female adults	-0.18	(.08)**	-0.2	(.07)**	-0.24	(.10)**
% over 55	-0.01	(.07)**	0.12	(.12)**	-0.11	(.14)*
% Blacks	-0.05	(.04)*	-0.01	-0.25	-0.06	-0.10
% Mexican born	0.04	-0.13				
% Russian born	0.17	(.29)**	0.09	(.43)*	0.08	-2.81
% Italian born	0.14	(.44)**	-0.02	-0.10	-0.02	-0.41
Constant	0.36	(.06)**	0.13	-0.07	0.43	(.08)**
R ²	0.68		0.87		0.83	
Merriam's % of vote						
<i>Independent variables:</i>						
% blue-collar males	-0.7	(.07)**	-0.89	(.09)**	-0.83	(.11)**
% female adults	0.16	(.08)**	0.12	(.08)**	0.20	(.10)**
% over 55	0.03	-0.07	-0.11	(.12)**	0.13	(.13)**
% Blacks	0.10	(.03)**	0.03	-0.27	0.08	-0.10
% Mexican born	-0.01	-0.13				
% Russian born	-0.15	(.29)**	-0.07	-0.46	-0.07	-2.73
% Italian born	-0.11	(.43)**	0.05	-0.11	0.04	-0.40
Constant	0.55	(.05)**	0.87	(.07)**	0.50	(.08)**
R ²	0.69		0.83		0.84	
Haight's % of Vote						
<i>Independent variables:</i>						
% blue-collar males	0.13	(.02)*	0.7	(.03)**	0.40	(.03)**
% female adults	0.17	(.02)**	0.57	(.02)**	0.45	(.03)**
% over 55	-0.12	(.02)**	0	-0.04	-0.15	-0.04
% Blacks	-0.38	(.01)**	-0.21	(.08)**	-0.29	(.03)**
% Mexican born	-0.23	(.03)**				
% Russian born	-0.20	(.08)**	-0.12	-0.14	-0.03	-0.72
% Italian born	-0.16	(.11)**	-0.22	(.03)**	-0.15	-0.10
Constant	0.07	(.02)**	-0.03	-0.02	0.03	-0.02
R ²	0.07		0.46		0.32	

* Significant at .05 level (Sig T < 0.05)

** Significant at .01 level (Sig T < 0.01)

Sources: County precinct reports, California Secretary of State, General Election November 6, 1934; U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1940 Population. Statistics by Census Tracts for Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oakland, San Francisco, Tables 1, 2, 3, 5, 6.

Table 3: Regression analysis of percentage of vote for Sinclair, Merriam, and Haight in 159 municipalities and rural areas, 1934 California gubernatorial election

	Sinclair % vote		Merriam % vote		Haight % vote	
	Beta	(SE)	Beta	(SE)	Beta	(SE)
<i>Independent variables</i>						
% blue-collar males	0.12	(0.30)	-0.10	(0.42)	-0.21	(0.31)
% female adults	-0.16	(0.35)	0.29	(0.49)	-0.31	(0.36)
% over 55	0.07	(0.42)	-0.10	(0.59)	-0.13	(0.43)
% Blacks	0.09	(0.88)	-0.03	(1.22)	-0.07	(0.90)
% Foreign-born Mexicans, Italians, Spanish, Portuguese	0.03	(0)	-0.27	(0)	0.30	(0)
Constant	0.34	(0.26)	0.33	(0.36)	0.49	(0.26)
R ²	0.06		0.19		0.17	

Note: None of the coefficients meet the test of significance at the .05 level (Sig T < 0.05)

Sources: County precinct reports, California Secretary of State, General Election November 6, 1934; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1940. Population. Vol 2, Tables 21, 22, 23, 24, 30, 31, 32, 33.

Table 4: Occupations of 292 EPIC leaders and candidates

Occupation groups	Number	Percent	Leading Occupations	Number
Business/Managers	27	9%	Attorneys	22
Professional	67	23%	Real Estate/Insurance sales	13
Office/sales	48	16%	Other sales	20
Blue Collar work	33	11%	Merchants/store owners	11
housewives	18	6%	Accountants/bookkeepers	9
retired	8	3%	Writers	7
unknown	91	31%	Teachers	7
			Clergy	7
			Engineers	5
total	292	100%	Skilled blue collar	25

Sources: Upton Sinclair's End Poverty Paper, Dec. 26-Jan 2, 1934 through August, 1934; City Directories for many cities; Great Registers (voting registration) for Alameda, Kern, Los Angeles, Marin, Monterey, Orange, San Francisco, and San Luis Obispo counties.

Table 5: Occupations by leadership sector for 292 EPIC leaders

Club and District leaders	Number	Percent	Candidates	Number	Percent
Business owners/Managers	25	16%	Business owners/Managers	2	5%
Professional	41	26%	Professional	27	61%
Office	36	23%	Office	12	27%
Blue Collar	31	19%	Blue Collar	3	7%
Housewife	18	11%	Housewife	0	0%
Retired	8	5%	Retired	0	0%
Total known	159	100%	Total known	44	100%
Unknown	80		Unknown	9	
total	239		total	53	

Sources: Upton Sinclair's End Poverty Paper, Dec. 26-Jan 2, 1934 through August, 1934; City Directories for many cities; Great Registers (voting registration) for Alameda, Kern, Los Angeles, Marin, Monterey, Orange, San Francisco, and San Luis Obispo counties. See depts.washington.edu/epic34/anatomy.shtml.

Table 6: 1932 party registration for EPIC candidates, district and club leaders

	Club leaders		Candidates		Combined	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Republican	64	57%	13	57%	77	57%
Democrat	28	25%	7	30%	35	26%
Socialist	9	8%	2	9%	11	8%
Liberty	1	1%	0	0%	1	1%
Independent/Decline to state	11	10%	1	4%	12	9%
total	113	100%	23	100%	136	100%

Sources: Upton Sinclair's End Poverty Paper, Dec. 26-Jan 2, 1934 through August, 1934; City Directories for many cities; Great Registers (voting registration) for Alameda, Kern, Los Angeles, Marin, Monterey, Orange, San Francisco, and San Luis Obispo counties.