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How to Teach Students to Assess Political Candidates' Potential to Be Peace and Justice Leaders: A Case Study of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT)

Analysis of Gavin Newsom

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Abstract

Those interested in creating a more peaceful and just world want to vote for elected officials who will serve these aims best. As peace educators, we can and should help students make informed choices about the candidates who are best suited to achieve this. This is extremely important for the 2028 election, as the United States is engaged in several wars and violent conflicts, and human rights and social justice domestically are under attack. This article describes a strategy that peace educators can use to help students assess political candidates' potential to be peace and justice leaders. It offers a case study, conducted with a class of upper-level undergraduate sociology majors, of a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT)

analysis focused on California Governor Gavin Newsom as a peace and justice candidate for the Democrats in 2028.

Keywords

Leadership, political education, political candidates, Gavin Newsom, peace and justice leadership

Introduction

Peace education, especially critical peace education, emphasizes examining systems of oppression and "unlearning" how to participate in them. Moreover, critical peace education focuses on engaging students in thoughtful dialogue about systemic oppression and remedies to it. Further, those engaged in critical peace education are interested in empowering students to take action to create a more peaceful and just world. Civic responsibility is a hallmark of peace education, as informed, engaged, and ethically minded voters help create institutions and structures that support human needs. Peace education as global citizenship education has been practiced around the world for decades (Kester, 2026). As Kester (2026) noted, peace education as global citizenship education is "Rooted in foundational works and supported by UNESCO, it emphasizes addressing global injustices such as domination and oppression while fostering democratic values, empathy, and cooperative action in conflict-affected and interconnected global contexts" (p. 377). One part of civic responsibility in the United States is voting. As such, peace educators have a responsibility to give students skills to be informed voters and to use their electoral voices to support peace and justice candidates. As Snauwaert (2020) noted,

> Future citizens will have to make fundamental moral and political choices regarding the appropriate use of military force, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the distribution of global economic and social resources, the protection of human rights, the justification of humanitarian military intervention, the ethics of climate change and other environmental challenges, among many other ethical and moral choices. In a democratic society, citizen participation in decisions pertaining to peace and justice are among the most important civic responsibilities (p. 48).

One strategy to assess a candidate's capabilities is a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis. SWOT analyses are often used in the

business world for decision-making but have also been used to assess the viability of political candidates for specific issues such as the promotion of human rights (see Finley & Esposito, 2011). Engaging students in SWOT analysis avoids educator bias in that students search for the evidence and critically examine it, rather than being told about a candidate and how to vote. This then helps build their critical and civic literacy.

For peace educators, a starting point for a SWOT analysis of a political candidate is to identify what criteria make someone a peace and justice candidate. I offer the following eight pillars of positive peace. First developed by Galtung (1969), I am using the descriptions of the "attitudes, institutions, and structures that create and sustain peace" presented by Vision of Humanity and used in their annual Peace Index to consider the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of Newsom as a peace and justice president. These include 1) Well-functioning government, which is one that provides quality public and civil services, is politically stable, and upholds the rule of law; 2) Sound business environment that ensures business competitiveness and economic productivity; 3) Equitable distribution of resource, including education, health, and to some degree income; 4) Acceptance of the basic human rights of others; 5) Good relationships with neighbors, or harmonious interactions with other countries as well as between ethnic, religious, and cultural groups within the country; 6) Free flow of information via independent media; 7) High levels of human capital that reflects a commitment to an educated populace;. and 8) Low levels of corruption (Vision of Humanity, 2022).

The following example of a SWOT analysis based on these pillars focuses on Gavin Newsom as a 2028 presidential candidate. I worked with my upper-level Sociology of Violence course to create this SWOT analysis in Spring 2026. In the example included here Pillar One is assessed by focusing on resources for those most in need, particularly the homeless. Pillar Two here addresses Newsom's work to build global collaborations that strengthen the economy. Regarding Pillars Three and Seven, this paper focuses on Newsom's policies and platforms related to education, health, reproductive rights, and inequality. Pillars Four and Five are assessed related to Newsom's policies and positions relevant to gender equality, global militarism, criminal justice reform, and the death penalty. Pillar Six is reviewed related to Newsom's relationship with the media, and, finally, Pillar Eight is connected specifically to a review of Newsom's record on corruption. Students were divided into groups of three, with each group given one of the pillars to research. They then decided whether Newsom's position or record on that pillar was a strength, weakness, opportunity, or threat, which they presented to the class.

As is clear in the case study, there were a few areas of disagreement but ultimately the class was comfortable with the way the SWOT analysis turned out.

It is my hope that peace educators might find the process of SWOT analysis to be a useful method for teaching students how to assess political candidates for their potential to promote peace and justice.

Case Study: Newsom as a Candidate

A sizeable portion of people who align politically liberal have applauded California Governor Gavin Newsom, with some declaring that they would support him in a 2028 presidential bid. While at the time of this writing Newsom has not officially declared that he intends to run, he has said he is open to it. Many other factors, such as significant changes in his policy positions, indicate that he will put his hat in the ring. Some people like that Newsom has experience running a state that is the fourth largest economy in the world and his brash style and refusal to kowtow to Donald Trump has set him apart in many ways from other candidates. A *CBS* poll from October 2025 found that 72 percent of Democrats and 48 percent of all registered voters thought that Newsom should put his hat in the ring (Sainato, 2025). Klein (2025) also reported in December 2025 that Newsom was leading in many polls. As of January 23, 2026, Newsom remained in the lead for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2028, which some have said is impressive due to the fact that some of his competitors like Kamala Harris and Pete Buttigieg have more national name recognition (Novicoff & Chait, 2026). A May 2026 poll found Newsom and Harris to be neck-and-neck (Mantell, 2026). Novicoff and Chait (2026) noted that Newsom's "new persona as a fighting moderate, a Democrat in tune with the country's shifting desires and ruthless toward the man at the top, deftly speaks to the needs of a party desperate to regain the White House."

But is Newsom the right candidate to push for a more peaceful and just world? For more humane policies in the United States? Novicoff and Chait (2026) argue that,

> Newsom has a problem: He has been a California politician for decades and has held the state's governorship since 2019. During his tenure, the state has been a laboratory for some of the Democratic Party's most politically fraught policies and instincts, which has left it less affordable and more culturally radical than it used to be. His record not only raises pressing questions about how effectively he could govern as president; it also

provides opponents an endless buffet of vulnerabilities across social and economic issues.

Strengths

One strength is Newsom's position on the militarization of communities. He has been a vocal critic of President Trump's deployment of soldiers to cities around the United States, including specifically to Los Angeles. From June 2025 until mid-December, more than 4,000 national guard soldiers were federalized and sent to Los Angeles to allegedly quell unrest related to immigration enforcement. Newsom was the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit challenging the legality of Trump's actions, which he referred to as "theater." The U.S. 9th Circuit Court of appeals agreed but did not go as far as a lower court judge had in ruling that Trump should relinquish command of the state's forces. At the time of this writing, the case is under review by the Supreme Court. The troops left Los Angeles before the court's required deadline of December 18 (Sharp, 2025). The lawsuit Newsom led challenged not just the legality of the deployment but also the fact that the service members were pulled from essential civilian duties. These include medical and first responders, law enforcement personnel, corrections officers, building contractors, and other civil service positions. Newsom was supported by several retired four-star generals, former secretaries of the Army and Navy, and myriad veterans and veteran's rights groups.

Newsom was also assertive when President Trump planned to send 300 California national guard troops to Oregon, which a judge blocked in December 2025. He said, "The commander-in-chief is using the US military as a political weapon against American citizens. We will take this fight to court, but the public cannot stay silent in the face of such reckless and authoritarian conduct by the president of the United States" (News Agencies, 2025).

Newsom has also been critical of the aggressive use of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in Los Angeles and other places. Given that 27 percent of California's residents are foreign born, Newsom said that even law-abiding citizens and legal residents in the state were living in fear. One person was confirmed to have died during an especially cruel and chaotic raid on a California farm (Fields, 2025). Mass arrests, detentions, and deportations, Newsom and others have argued, would cut $275 billion from the state's economy, eliminate $23 billion in annual tax revenue, and dramatically affect food supply. Further, these efforts will drive up costs when many are already struggling and delay essential projects like rebuilding Los Angeles after wildfires (Governor Gavin Newsom, 2025a).

Newsom has been consistent in his criticism of sweeping ICE raids by masked agents, often bringing it up in public appearances. He has also produced ads showing ominous-looking ICE agents. In September 2025, Newsom signed into law a ban on ICE agents wearing masks asserting that ICE agents would no longer be "hidden from accountability" (Fields, 2025). Jeremy White (2025) with Politico explained, "The governor and his allies are banking on it driving voters to the polls in defiance of Trump's agenda — in much the same way the issue transformed California politics decades ago when Latino voters revolted against an anti-immigration ballot initiative." White believes that the Trump administration is engaged in racial discrimination with the ICE raids and that the backlash to it has united Democrats who will support Newsom's more progressive agenda.

During the first Trump administration, Newsom passed a so-called sanctuary law to limit local law enforcement from cooperating with immigration agents, saying "Immigrants have rights and we have the right to stand up and push back." In September 2025, he expanded those efforts by signing into law prohibitions on immigration offers entering school campuses without warrants, requiring that law enforcement officers identify themselves while conducting their duties (with some exceptions), prohibiting immigration enforcement officers from entering restricted areas of healthcare facilities without court orders or judicial warrants, and requiring school and university officials to send community notification when immigration enforcement officers are on campus. Although many experts assert that these efforts will make little difference (Mihalovich & Kuang, 2025), that Newsom made the courageous choice to sign into law many protections from aggressive, militarized immigration enforcement is definitely a strength in this author's opinion.

When the United States launched missiles at Iran, Newsom was quick to denounce the attack. He referred to it as a sign of "weakness masquerading as strength" and an effort to distract from President Trump's poor poll numbers. Newsom also expressed concern that the attack has sparked an "illegal, dangerous war" that would jeopardize Americans (Gardiner, 2026). This strong criticism of military action that has to date not been in any way adequately justified will likely sit well with progressive voters, especially those devoted to ending war.

On healthcare, Newsom has said "I believe in universal health care. Others may say it—I did it." He expanded Medicaid in California to cover people who entered the country illegally, which many progressive support as being aligned with a human rights perspective. Due to budget shortfalls that effort was suspended for new undocumented applicants (Novicoff & Chait, 2026). As a result of Newsom's

efforts, more than a million Californian's who are not in the state legally qualify for Medi-Cal (Hart & Mai-Duc, 2025).

Another strength seems to be Newsom's advocacy on gender-based violence, especially in comparison to Donald Trump. He has signed into law a variety of measures to help victims of domestic violence. The new legislation removed some barriers to getting restraining orders and extended the time that an abuser under restraining order must stay away from their victim. Further, the legislation created a restitution fund, funded by penalties recovered from white collar offenders, to help victims financially. Additionally, the statute of limitations to charge an individual with abuse was extended to seven years, while another component is aimed at preventing abusers from tracking victims by requiring that car manufacturers allow drivers to terminate remote access to a vehicle (Governor Gavin Newsom, 2024).

His wife, Jennifer Siebel Newsom, is a long-time advocate for gender equality, a survivor of sexual assault, and a documentary filmmaker, so together they make a solid pair on gender issues. Siebel Newsom, the First Partner, led a task force started in 2023 to improve California's response to sexual assault. It issued a report offering a roadmap of what is needed to prevent sexual abuse and to improve trauma-informed assistance for survivors in 2025 (Stein, et al, 2025). She has two words written on a dry erase board in her office: "gender equality" and "support for survivors." The First Partner applauded Newsom after he enacted the new domestic violence laws, stating, "I applaud the Governor and the Legislature for centering survivors and creating new pathways for their safety, support, and justice" (Governor Gavin Newsom, 2024).

Governor Newsom's efforts to support reproductive freedom would likely be considered by peace and justice scholars and activists to be a strength. In 2022 he led the successful campaign to enshrine access to abortion into California's constitution. In addition, Newsom signed laws that ensure abortions and miscarriages are not criminalized, to allow out-of-state doctors to perform abortions in the state, and built a stockpile of mifepristone, an abortion medication, when it was under threat of a national ban. As well, Newsom allotted $20 million to help low-income women afford abortions (Hart & Mai-Duc, 2025).

On the environment, Newsom has been a leader and a vocal critic of the Trump administration's lack of attention to climate change. In his 2026 State of the State address, Newsom decried the president's absence at a Cop30 climate summit in Brazil and the announcement that Trump would again remove the US from the Paris Agreement, which focuses on countries committing to curb emissions.

Newsom has referred to Trump as an "invasive species" and said that his dismissal of climate change is an "abomination." He headed a coalition of more than 100 elected officials at Cop30. Trump refused to attend. Further, Newsom is one of 24 governors who are part of the US Climate Alliance, which he co-founded in 2017 when Trump first withdrew from the Paris Agreement. California voters gave Newsom 80% on their California Environmental Scorecard. Newsom has stressed is that Democrats needed to reframe the debate around the climate crisis. He said, "Climate change can seem abstract. We need to talk in terms that people understand. It's about people, places, lifestyles and traditions. If we put things in those terms, we can start winning people over." Additionally, Newsom's collaborative approach on the environment is a welcome change to the Trump denials and isolationism. Newsom's administration has signed agreements with several nations, including Japan and various European countries, which are focused on clean energy initiatives (Bernhardt, 2025). "As climate disasters cost Americans trillions, Trump's answer is to wave the white flag. California won't retreat. We'll keep working with our partners around the world to cut pollution, create jobs, and lead the clean energy economy that the Trump administration is too weak to fight for" (Milman & Noor, 2025).

Newsom's potential for engaging in diplomacy and global cooperation seems to be a strength. He has taken diplomatic missions to China to meet with President Xi Jinping to address the shared interest in climate change but also to help attract investment and expand trade—quite the opposite of the Trump administration's antagonistic and isolationist approach. He has also reached out to Japan, offering "a vision of American leadership that is engaged, collaborative, and grounded in shared values. His actions send a message that while federal policy may ebb and flow, states like California are committed to building lasting international partnerships" (Bernhardt, 2025).

Peace and justice scholars and activists definitely see Newsom's opposition to the death penalty as a strength. In March 2019 he announced a moratorium on the death penalty in California. He also halted executions, took down the execution chamber, and dismissed the execution protocol for the state. In doing so, Newsom announced, "I have been openly opposed to the death penalty my whole life, and the people elected me knowing that." One year later, he authorized the transfer of the 700+ death-sentenced individuals to state prisons. They were subsequently mainstreamed among the general population. He has not, however, commuted the death sentences of the 580 people who are still imprisoned, which some progressives may see as a weakness stemming from his desire to be more electable as president (Delucco, 2026).

Newsom has also championed some other important criminal justice reforms. In 2025 he signed into law Assembly Bill 1071, a Racial Justice Act that expands previous efforts first enacted in 2020, allowing those who make claims of racial discrimination to have meaningful access to legal support, evidence, and due process in court. The new law requires that people making racial discrimination claims be provided court-appointed counsel if they cannot afford an attorney. It also enhances the right for plaintiffs to access records and data that can support their claims of systemic disparities (Khan, 2025). In 2026, he announced the completion of an innovative educational complex at the notorious San Quentin prison. The San Quentin Learning Center "is designed to improve the lives of and working conditions for employees and incarcerated people, supporting the creation of a more effective justice system that builds safer communities." It is intended to support rehabilitation and offers a full range of reentry services (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2026). In

Under Newsom's leadership, California is considered the most progressive on moving towards state-wide reparations for slavery. In 2020 after the murder of George Floyd Newsom formed a task force to consider how the state could provide reparations. Two years after the task force submitted its recommendations Newsom signed SB 518, which created a new office to address systemic racism and reparations. At a press conference announcing the creation of the task force, Newsom spoke about the need to "tear out the institutional racism from all of our institutions, large and small" and a few days later in a speech about racial achievement gaps in education and economically, Newsom declared we "get serious about addressing these disparities" (Burgis, 2021). While I would argue this makes his work on racism to be a strength by comparison to other state leaders, some have criticized Newsom for acting too slowly and for expressing that he does not support cash payments to descendants of slaves (Holden, 2025). This is addressed below as a weakness.

In 2021, Newsom signed a bill requiring that completion of an ethnic studies course be mandatory to graduate from a California public school. While this would seem to be a strength to many peace and justice studies scholars, activists, and educators, there has been controversy about the law since it was proposed in 2016 under Newsom's predecessor Jerry Brown. How Newsom has and continues to handle the controversy shows slipperiness and willingness to appease the most vocal critics. Jewish groups complained about an earlier curriculum that was proposed to be used in the course that was more sympathetic to Palestinians, which resulted in Newsom vetoing a bill requiring ethnic studies in 2020. They reached agreement the following year, with the curriculum covering the history of four marginalized groups-- African American, Latino, Native American and Asian American people.

The bill specifies that all California high schools offered an ethnic studies course as an elective by fall 2025 and makes it a requirement for graduation by 2029-2030 (He, 2025b).

Newsom will be term-limited so cannot run again for Governor after 2027. This provides him with more time to focus on a presidential campaign (Wolf, 2025). Unlike some of the other potential contenders he has the time and money to run a campaign that could really reach peace and justice proponents with nuanced ideas and policies, should he choose to do so.

Weaknesses

One of the biggest criticisms of Newsom is that he talks big but has not always followed through on campaign promises. While this is not unique to him, it certainly is a weakness that does not sit well with many progressives. In 2018, Newsom promised to usher into California a single-payer public healthcare system. He did not. One union organizer expressed his feelings about it, saying "This is a flip-flop. This is absolutely unacceptable." Hart and Mai-Duc (2025) argued that his failure to become California's "healthcare governor," as he had pledged, is his biggest failure. They noted that healthcare costs in the state continue to rise and many Californians still struggle to get basic care.

Similarly, in 2019 Newsom promised to build 3.5 million new low-income housing units by 2025. That did not happen, so he dismissed it as a "stretch goal." Another pledge that fell through the cracks was appointing a "homeless czar" to address the state's homelessness issue. Eventually Newsom declared himself to be the czar but as the problem worsened, he put the blame on local officials (Durán, 2026).

Another area of flip flop was Newsom's approach to COVID 19. He drew praise in early 2020 for his decisive actions to halt the spread, but amidst protest by right-wingers and after Elon mush reopened his Tesla factory in California, in violation of the state's public health rules, Newsom caved. He hurriedly re-opened the state, blamed county officials for the closures, with the result being a surge in infections and deaths from COVID (Durán, 2026).

Newsom's work on getting the ethnic studies course part of California's graduation requirements can be considered a strength. However, Newsom omitted the funding to cover the teacher salaries and textbooks (an estimated $276 million per year) from his budget in 2025. Some assert that he is avoiding the controversy as he gears up for a presidential run, especially given President Trump's threats to

pull federal funding from the state for violating his executive order on diversity initiatives. Critics say that Newsom is caving. This is discussed later, as a threat (He, 2025b).

Although his opposition to the death penalty and the moratorium placed on capital punishment in 2019 is notable, peace and justice scholars and activists want Newsom to do more, including commuting all of the death sentences to life imprisonment. Failing to do so allows his successor to potentially resume executions (Durán, 2026). Like Newsom's progress on racial issues, his failure to commute the 580 death sentences mentioned earlier bothers some progressives. Delucco (2026) explained,

> Newsom, who has made it clear his opposition is firmly rooted in his belief that the death penalty is immoral and indefensible, can and should show the courage he showed in 2019 when he announced the moratorium, and commute the sentences of the 580 people living under a sentence of death. In announcing the moratorium seven years ago, Newsom explained, "This is about who I am as a human being." It's time for him to show his humanity again.

Although he has been critical of ICE, Newsom upset many Democrats when he was asked in April about the erroneous deportation of Kilmar Abrego Garcia, which was in flagrant violation of a court order, Newsom downplayed it as "the distraction of the day." He suggested that Democrats should resist talking about immigration because it is an "80-20 issue" for Republicans (Scher, 2025). This is a pretty unpopular opinion with many Democrat voters. For example, in a December 15, 2025 poll, 86 percent of Democrat and Democrat-leaning voters said the administration is doing "too much" to deport undocumented immigrations (Hartig, 2025).

On Israel, an issue that remains a significant political challenge just as it did during the 2024 presidential campaigning, Newsom has supported calls for a ceasefire and for a two-state solution. While Newsom said he denounced Hamas's October 7 terrorist attack, he called for collaboration to enact enduring peace as well as maintain the security, autonomy, and freedom of both the Israeli and Palestinian people (Kamal, 2024). In October 2025, after having visited Israel and lending California's support by shipping medical supplies to help with humanitarian relief, Newsom expressed his relief that it seemed a ceasefire had been reached, although inevitably it did not last (Governor Gavin Newsom, 2025b). Although Newsom has called for a ceasefire and the reaching of peace in Gaza, the website TRACK AIPAC calls him a pro-Israel candidate because he received as of

January 2026, an undisclosed amount of lobbying money. This puts him in contrast with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who many believe might launch a run or be considered to be the vice president on a ticket. As Starr (2025) wrote, positions on Israel have turned voters and donors away from the party. Polls are already showing that Israel will be an issue of concern for the most progressive Democrat voters.

While some elected leaders and potential presidential candidates like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez strongly condemned President Trump's actions in Venezuela, Newsom was more cautious in his comments. In December 2025, the Trump administration opened fire on boats coming from Venezuela, claiming they were narco-trafficking terrorist groups bringing fentanyl to the US. More than 100 people have been killed in these strikes, including a controversial situation in which two people survived the first blast and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth authorized a second strike, or "double-tap," to kill them. While investigations are ongoing, many believe that these actions violate international law (Drenon, 2025). The administration then extended the attacks on Venezuelan soil, and in January 2026, captured, or as some say, kidnapped, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores and brought them to New York to face federal charges. Again, many see this as a blatant violation of international law. Newsom's comments gave peace and justice activists pause. He was critical of the Trump administration proposal that the US run Venezuela but tempered them by expressing that "Maduro is a thug and a criminal" (Novicoff & Chait, 2026).

In 2025 Newsom signed a new law related to antisemitism that some applauded while others claimed was simply a proxy for the war in Gaza. The bill addresses antisemitism in schools and was controversial even among Democrats, with many seeing it as stifling teachers' academic freedom. Even some Jewish groups were dissatisfied with the final bill, as they wanted it to specify that would go farther and be linked to the curricula for the state's ethnic studies courses in public schools (He, 2025a). This controversy did little to ingratiate the progressives in the party.

While Newsom is running a huge economy, some assert he is not doing it very well. Homelessness remains a huge issue, with the state being home to the nation's largest homeless population, and some have criticized Newsom's efforts to address it despite spending more than $20 billion. As Hart and Mai-Duc (2025) explained, "Under Newsom, California has spent unprecedented public money on tackling homelessness, yet the crisis has worsened under his watch." Despite these efforts and the money spent, homelessness in California jumped more than 20 percent between 2019 and 2023.

Further, critics assert that Newsom's push to enforce legislation against encampments, after the Supreme Court made it legal to penalize sleeping and camping in public places, is cruel and inhumane (Sy & Buhre, 2025). Newsom ordered state agencies to ramp up their enforcement against encampments in 2025 and urged cities to make it illegal to camp in one place for three or more nights. He has claimed these efforts are to prevent unsafe and unsanitary encampments but the problem of what to do with homeless individuals remains (Kendall, 2025). As Navicoff & Chait (2026) explained, "If Newsom wins the nomination, Republican attack ads will inevitably roll the tape of children walking home from school past unsheltered people using drugs in public." Further, Hart and Mai-Duc (2025) noted that a state audit in 2024 found that the state is not doing a good job of tracking how taxpayer money is spent for Newsom's programs.

Although I believe Newsom's work on addressing systemic racism is a strength in comparison to other state leaders, it can also be considered a weakness. For instance, in 2024, he vetoed a bill that would have allowed reparations for victims of racially motivated eminent domain, explaining that he did so because the state had no office to oversee and administer the program (Holden, 2025). Burgis (2021) noted that much of what Newsom has done has been more symbolic that actually to the material benefit of people of color. He cited Newsom's veto in 2021 of a bill that would have expanded California's primary financial aid program, Cal Grant, to make an additional150,000 students eligible. A sizeable amount of the recipients would have been students of color recipients, thereby making it a concrete measure to address the "achievement gap" that Newsom cites. Newsom also vetoed a bill that would have allowed colleges to prioritize descendants of slaves (Mihalovich & Fry, 2025).

California has long been plagued by corrupt politicians. While there are no actual allegations against Newsom, a scandal involving his former chief of staff could be an issue in the election. Dana Williamson is facing federal charges on bank fraud, for allegedly falsifying documents to obtain a federal business loan during the COVID 19 pandemic and an alleged scheme to drain hundreds of thousands of dollars from a campaign account maintained by former Biden cabinet member and attorney general Xavier Becerra (Walters, 2026).

President Trump used the opportunity to spread the lie that Newsom was involved, a claim that Newsom denied and alleged was simply politically motivated to sully his reputation and those of other democrat governors. Newsom's office in turn pointed out fraud in republican-led states and highlighted California's anti-fraud efforts, but the damage may still have been done (Gutierrez & Smith, 2026).

Opportunities

While not all on the political left agree, that Newsom does not seem afraid to challenge Donald Trump or other Republicans and conservative pundits might afford him a unique opportunity to appeal to some progressive voters, especially younger ones. This, Klein (2025) maintained is why Newsom has polled well (albeit early) when normally a liberal Californian would not. Klein (2025) explained that Newsom's podcast that he started right after the 2024 election was not popular at first with Democrats, as he interviewed right-wing darlings, including Charlie Kirk, Steve Bannon, Newt Gingrich, and Michael Savage. But it showed a lack of fear and a willing to push boundaries, which Newsom has continued to do as he trolls Trump on social media using some of the same types of language. In another bold move, when Texas voted to redistrict midcycle to allow for more Republican seats, Newsom followed suit in California, creating a highly partisan map.

Further, Newsom seems to be articulating a clear description of what is wrong, but also a path for what can be right. He told Klein (2025).

> Trump's success is destroying, not building. That's easy. And you can destroy in nanoseconds. The symbolism and the substance of the East Wing — that's destruction. DOGE — destruction. And that kind of destruction somehow satiates people in this respect. They feel like: Oh, there's something actually happening. There's real action here.
>
> But to be a builder, that's where greatness is. That's where greatness lies.
>
> That's what I believe was the master class of the Biden administration. It was able to create a framework to build again at scale — a $1.2 trillion infrastructure package, the I.R.A. — so we can compete against our most fierce competitor, China. In low-carbon, green growth, Biden delivered $369 billion.
>
> The reality, though, obviously, is that Trump will take advantage of a lot of those investments. But he is also taking advantage of the narrative of destruction.

Another possible opportunity to woo voters is Newsom's background having grown up in Catholic churches and attended a Jesuit university. While far

from an evangelical, he identifies himself as spiritual and deeply committed to justice. Newsom, a former mayor of San Francisco, commented that "St. Francis is our patron saint in San Francisco: 'Many parts, one body.' When one part suffers, we all suffer. This notion of social justice, racial justice, economic justice is deeply ingrained in me. It has really shaped me in that respect. His willingness to listen to and afford some respect to darlings of the Right like Charlie Kirk because they could relate on strong belief systems (Klein, 2025). He explained that he has several grievances with Democrats, including that,

> …we haven't been organizing the campuses. We haven't been organizing young men. We haven't been addressing their societal screams, their concerns. Their suicide rate — four times that of women. Their dropout rates. Their depths of despair. We have men who are suffering, and it's hurting women. Any mother understands this (Klein, 2025).

This acknowledgement that men are suffering is a nice balance to his advocacy on gender equality and one that may appeal to male voters who are attracted to blowhards like Andrew Tate. Further, Newsom acknowledged that he and many other Democrats lost out to Trump and his followers because they were looking at things like jobs on the aggregate but not people's actual lives.

Another opportunity lies in the fact that a wave of progressive candidates has won election to various offices in the last year, including young democrat socialist Zohran Mamdani as Mayor of New York. Starr (2025) wrote,

> From Detroit to Pennsylvania to Buffalo, New York, and here in Ohio, insurgent, progressive Democrats are defeating their long-established colleagues in dozens of school board, city council and mayoral races, throwing the already-divided national party into chaos, even as polls indicate it stands to potentially benefit at next year's midterm elections due to the Trump administration's divisive policies.

Yet as has been noted herein, while Newsom has been a progressive leader in California on many issues, he is not perhaps as progressive as some voters want, especially as he tacks more centrist in preparation for a run, which is discussed below.

Threats

Although historically Newsom was considered an ally on LGBTQ rights, some of his more recent comments on LGBTQ rights can be seen as less supportive and thus

might be a threat. Historically, Newsom was an early supporter of gay marriage. In 2004, when he was Mayor of San Francisco, he declared marriage equality in the city and the county. During a 2021 recall effort that Newsom survived, the support of many LGBTQ voters and organizations was key and he used it to highlight the state's commitment to inclusivity. Further, Newsom has been a critic of laws like Florida's "Don't Say Gay" that attempt to restrict instruction about sexual orientation and gender identity in public schools. In 2022, Newsom signed into law the protection for trans youth receiving gender-affirming care amidst a wave or Republican-led states banning it. The Advocate noted that in 2023, Newsom signed into law nine pro-LGBTQ+ bills and vetoed one. Those he signed included LGBTQ+ competency training for public school employees, confidentiality for minors in court petitions to change gender or sex identifier, requiring evaluation of foster care homes, labeling single-user public restrooms as all-gender, and more. Newsom vetoed a bill that would have required courts to consider whether a parent is supportive of a child's gender identity when making custody decisions. In 2024, Newsom signed a law that prohibits schools from disclosing a student's sexual or gender identity or sexuality to their guardians without the student's permission and another law that protects teachers from being fired if they refuse to "out" a trans child to their guardians (Ring, 2025).

In 2025, Newsom continued to sign into law several pro-LGBTQ+ bills but vetoed three. The new laws strengthen confidentiality in health care, seal transgender and nonbinary adults' court records about their gender transition (as he had previously with minors), enhance paid family leave to be more inclusive, allow out-of-state gay couples to access in-state channels when trying to adopt in California, mandate that universities in the state provide all students with LGBTQ-specific suicide hotlines, and made easier to change one's name on official documents. But he vetoed bills that would have required insurers to cover up to one year of prescribed hormones and HIV prevention drugs without prior authorization as well as one that would have required public schools to use an inclusive view on gender during health education classes (Ring, 2025).

Newsom has apparently changed his position on transgender females participating in girls' sports, something he now sees as "deeply unfair." This is, many speculate, a sign that he intends to run in 2028 and is hedging his bets on this issue. Newsom has a podcast, "This is Gavin Newsom," in which he interviews political figures he disagrees. In an interview with the conservative activist Charlie Kirk, who was murdered in September 2025, Newsom agreed with Kirk that allowing trans females to participate in girls' sports is "…an issue of fairness. I completely agree with you on that. It is an issue of fairness. It's deeply unfair. I'm not wrestling with the fairness issue. I totally agree with you" (Koseff, 2025).

Further, LGBTQ+ advocates were upset when Newsom withdrew in 2024 $40 million in funding to LGBTQ+ and other health programs. Los Angeles LGBT Center CEO Joe Hollendoner explained, “Let’s be clear: Balancing the state budget on the backs of vulnerable queer communities is a moral failure. The state legislature restored the funds, and Newsom allowed it (Ring, 2025).

Although his position on healthcare as a basic right seems clear, polls show that providing healthcare to undocumented immigrants is not very popular so could stand in the way of Newsom’s pathway to election (Novicoff & Chait, 2026). Only 29 percent of respondents to a 2025 poll said they supported continuing California’s program of providing healthcare to people regardless of their immigration status (Bluth, 2025).

Because many of the more progressive policies Newsom has supported are popular among Democratic voters,

> Newsom could very well make it through a primary despite a record that would repulse swing voters come November 2028. Just about everything people don’t like about the Democratic Party has come true in Newsom’s California.” Further, Democrats have turned affordability into their most effective cudgel against the Trump administration. Should he run for president, Newsom’s record in California would seriously compromise this message (Navicoff & Chait, 2026).

Newsom does seem to realize that his more progressive stances might not sit well in a national election, so he began moving a bit more centrist in 2023. Novicoff and Chait (2026) noted that he vetoed measures that would have given unemployment benefits to striking workers and extended workplace safety standards to domestic workers—measures that were backed by labor groups that are Democrat. He announced that he was trying to stop a wealth tax on billionaires that unions had proposed and in September 2025 signed a measure to increase oil drilling in California. One Democrat strategist explained, “He is adored by the MSNBC wine mom crowd because of his Trump trolling, but when the actual primary kicks into high gear, primary voters are going to quickly learn about his record and policies that have disappointed a lot of people and groups in California.” Progressives are disappointed with his move toward the center (Parnes, 2026). As Novicoff and Chait (2026) explained,

> Newsom has capably sensed what Democrats want right now, and is delivering it with a roguish charisma. The trouble is that before this awkwardly recent pivot, the governor spent years trying to satisfy every

> Democratic whim in a state where there was little incentive to appeal to anybody who would even consider voting for Trump.

To some progressives, Newsom's move away from some of the positions he espoused might seem wishy washy and simply not progressive enough. Durán (2026) commented, "Like Trump, Newsom breaks promises, serves billionaire interests and mistakes social media theatrics for leadership. Is that really what American voters will want in 2028?"

The Working Families Party, which helped get Mamdani elected, is growing in size and influence and may also be a threat to Newsom's chance of getting elected. It's director Maurice Mitchell said about Americans' desire for a third-party option, "For 26 years, we've been building this argument. And the argument has met the moment" (Leingang, 2025).

As well, while Newsom is polling well as of this writing in February 2026, there is still a long time and some strong and popular contenders who will likely throw their hats in the ring. Some polls have former presidential candidate and vice president Kamala Harris ahead. A Focaldata poll found Harris to be the leading contender with Newsom significantly behind her (Stanton, 2026). While some criticized Harris for repeatedly referring to her middle-class roots, Newsom is far easier to criticize for coming from affluence and all the benefits it brings as a candidate. His father Gordon Getty was a billionaire when billionaires were rare who capitalized his son's first businesses, and his gubernatorial campaigns were financed in large part by San Franciso's wealthiest families (Burgis, 2021). In comparison to Newsom, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez appears to have more genuinely grown up in a working-class family.

Conclusion

After reviewing Newsom's record and pledges, the class determined that he would be a tolerable pick as a peace and justice president. The class was not convinced, however, that he is the best that Democrats can run if they really want to emphasize positive peace. Playing the same game that Trump is in terms of spewing vitriol was off-putting to many but not all of the students in the class. While Newsom has many strengths on social justice issues, he has often flip flopped on his promises or failed to produce. It seems he is doing that more frequently in the lead up to a campaign, which we found to be disturbing. Given that support for Israel was such a key part of Kamala Harris's loss, his positions on the United States continued involvement are wishy washy, at best. Since the economy emerged as the number

one factor for many voters in 2024 and it seems likely to be salient in 2028 as well, Newsom's record in California, especially on homelessness, leaves much to be desired.

As I noted in the Introduction, the material herein is factual but the analysis of what can be considered strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats belongs to me and my students. Student feedback about the case study was positive. They found this to be a useful activity, as most knew very little about Newsom's positions before conducting research. They also expressed a desire to learn more about the peace and justice-related positions of other leading Democratic candidates. Many peace educators will want to help their students understand the various candidates' positions on issues critical to "doing peace" or "peace praxis," (Boulding, 1988, p. 140) so hopefully this case study provides a useful tool for doing so.

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