

CALIFORNIA'S FENTANYL FIGHT

CBS NEWS CALIFORNIA INVESTIGATES | | | | | | | | | |

POLITICIANS V. PARENTS



CBS CALIFORNIA RELATED REPORTING:

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- [CBS News California Reporting Related to 'California's Fentanyl Fight'](#)
- [CBS News California Reporting Related to Prop 36](#)

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CBS Invests in Statehouse Investigative Reporting With 'California's Fentanyl Fight' Special

By [Matt Minton](#) ▾



Courtesy of CBS Stations

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Crunching legislative data with AI in California

By **David Leshner**,
CalMatters, and
Julie Watts, CBS
News

They fought for fentanyl legislation. It was killed before lawmakers got to vote. Three grieving mothers whose children were poisoned by fentanyl-laced prescription pills wanted to know why.

Enter CalMatters' Digital Democracy.

The unprecedented new website and AI search tool created by CalMatters is connected to a database run by engineering and data scientists at CalPoly San Luis Obispo. It includes every word uttered in a public meeting, every bill introduced, every vote cast, every dollar donated and more. The data is automatically scraped, downloaded or digitized from public government sources, and it's accessible in a search that scans multiple sources at once.

Digital Democracy was inspired by the decline in media coverage of state government in California. The user-friendly portal is intended to show a general, non-expert audience how the state Capitol really works. It is also a groundbreaking tool for journalists, providing quick and easy access to a vast amount of quickly searchable data, video and transcripts.

In two of the first stories published using Digital Democracy, CalMatters and CBS News California revealed a pattern of decisions made by the California Legislature that even journalists who watch the Capitol closely may not recognize without help from this database.

We quickly reviewed data on every vote cast by the 120 incumbent legislators over the past five years — more than 1 million total votes. CalMatters revealed that Democrats, who hold a supermajority in California, voted "no" less than 1% of the time, prompting critics to suggest the public process is a rubber stamp for backroom deals. Two legislators did not cast a single "no" vote.

The data also showed that, instead of voting "no," legislators often don't vote at all. In California, that's essentially the same as a "no" vote when it comes to killing a bill. But as CBS News California reported, it doesn't leave the same record of a legislator's opposition and it

outraged some advocates who said politicians were shirking their responsibility.

"I personally am insulted, because I think everything should be on the record when you hold a state title," said Regina Chavez, who was advocating for tougher laws on fentanyl along with two other mothers whose children died from fentanyl poisoning.

CBS told the story through the lens of those mothers who, before Digital Democracy, said they struggled to understand how the Capitol really worked. "Sometimes, this legislative process can seem kind of overwhelming to navigate and mystifying, but this really gives you this roadmap," said Laura Didier, who testified on behalf of fentanyl legislation after her son died.

For example, a simple search for a keyword like fentanyl, shows every bill that contains that word and instantly links to the transcript and video of every time fentanyl was mentioned in a public meeting.

They found at least three fentanyl-related bills died in 2023 when Democrats stayed silent instead of voting against tougher drug laws. One of the bills had 22 bipartisan cosponsors, indicating it would likely pass if it reached the floor of the Senate. It died in the Public Safety Committee when four progressive Democratic Senators declined to vote.

The database, released in April, has proved valuable for many other stories at CalMatters including "How Big Oil Wins in Green California" and reporting on which lobbies are the most successful in Sacramento. CBS News California used the tool to show viewers how lawmakers are really working (or not working) on issues ranging from the release of sexually violent predators to mental health diversion, and from police in schools to newborn DNA privacy.

This fall, CalMatters is also testing an artificial-intelligence tool that will scan the database in real time and suggest story ideas for reporters. The ideas are printed on a tipsheet that includes a summary of the idea and background on the issue, quotes for-and-against an issue, and data about the relationships between legislators and supporters and opponents.

According to Dean Baquet, former editor of the New York Times and a board member at CalMatters: "This has the possibility of transforming how newsrooms cover state government."

CalMatters is preparing to roll out Digital Democracy in other states next year. •

Project
Digital Democracy
Database:
digitaldemocracy.
calmatters.org

Articles
CalMatters,
April 9, 2024:
"Power is Never
Having to Say 'No.'
How California
Democrats Kill Bills
Without Voting
Against Them"

CBS News
California,
May 2, 2024:
"Using New AI,
Grieving Moms
Discover California
Lawmakers Killed
Popular Fentanyl Bill
by 'Not* Voting'"

David Leshner (he/him) is a veteran California journalist and state policy expert. He co-founded CalMatters in 2015 and led the organization as editor and CEO until 2018; he continued to serve as editor-in-chief until 2023.

Julie Watts (she/her) is a national-award-winning investigative correspondent for CBS News, covering California.



DIGITAL DEMOCRACY
CALMATTERS

PUBLIC FEEDBACK

Dear Mr. Sabalow and Ms. Watts,

Yesterday, I completed a CalMatters survey, which asked, in various ways, why I subscribe. Your work today is the exemplar.

"There's only two fucking buttons on your desk: There's a green button, and there's a red button," then-Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon told the California Labor Federation last year in remarks [reported by Politico](#). "Ninety-nine percent of the time, the green button is the labor button. Ninety-nine percent of the time, the green button means you're doing the right thing, and the red button means that you're an asshole."

A lifelong liberal, I need your investigatory work. I believe that the antidote to MAGATism is Truth. We do ourselves, and each other, a disservice by ignoring, or worse, concealing, how Our Government works. Your essay is at pains to let us understand that NOT voting lockstep with Democrats will cause retribution. That is just unacceptable. But you took that next important step:

You devised/revealed a great service by letting us see the data. The Digital Democracy shows what vital Democracy can do. A big hug to everyone, like you who are breathing fresh life into journalism. What a great day this is!

I'm retired, with Elders to care for and money is tight. But I'm going to make a donation today. I will, like I do, share this great work with everyone I can reach. It might be weird to say it, but I'm proud of you.

Dan

External Email

House of cards - spot on.

This is really good. Captures the story and impact in a way that hits regular people. That family could be anyone. And that's kinda the point. Super powerful.

External Email

So important to shine a light on how lawmakers keep from being held accountable. We did a report on this all the way back in the '00s - from your analysis it looks like the problem's only getting worse.

<https://consumerwatchdog.org/resources/NotVotingStudy2004.pdf>

Best, Carmen

<External Em

Ryan and Julie:

Kudos on your piece on members of the Legislature not voting. You are doing a service to your readers by informing them of this practice and you are improving democracy. I just have quick observation and a recommendation. It's true that the online voting records don't distinguish absent/abstain/NPR and that there is no "easy" way to determine whether a member abstained on a vote. Nevertheless, I think it may be worth reinforcing for your readers that while those distinctions aren't made in the online voting records, one can watch the hearing to see whether member was present and not voting, or one can watch the hearing or look at the record of votes for the hearing to determine whether the member was present to vote for other bills in that hearing. And one can check in the Journal to determine whether a member was present for a floor session, or of course watch the video of the session. Perhaps it's worth a reminder to readers that it's far from impossible to distinguish absent from abstain from NVR.

External Email

Hi Julie,

This was shared with me by a couple of my peers. Thank you for doing a great investigative story and educating the public as to what takes place in Sacramento. This needs to be known.

Alexandra's Law will be going to committee again in the coming weeks and it's also part of a ballot measure that the people of California will vote on this November. One way or another we are going to get it passed and hold fentanyl dealers accountable.

External Email

Great story Julie!

Time will tell if these lawmakers that simply choose not to vote on certain bills.

External Email

Thank you again for keeping the heat on lawmakers.

Thank you for your excellent coverage of "**Using new AI, grieving moms discover California lawmakers killed popular fentanyl bill by *not* voting**" and introducing viewers to the "**Digital Democracy**" website.

I truly appreciate your persistent efforts toward holding our elected officials accountable.

I look forward to possible follow-ups on this *not* voting problem and hope that this exposure may lead to positive action taken in the future.

Keep up the great work!

External Email

It's really shameful that our representatives skirt their responsibilities by abstaining. If they don't have the guts to vote then they shouldn't be on the Public Safety Committee.

External Email

External Email

Amazing piece, Julie. Don't know if I want to cry or vomit. Thanks for shining a light on this.

Julie,

I usually see your stories, but I had not seen this one. I knew about Newsom's attempt to lie to the public. I did not know about the public safety committee killing the bill 4 times. Those members are ghouls. They are more concerned about pushing the politics of "not locking more people up" than they are about protecting the public.

I did not get to listen today, but a friend told me John McGinness talked about this today on his show. I will listen later.

As a father of an 18-year-old away at college, I cannot imagine how Alexandra's parents processed her murder. I am sure you feel the same.

Thank you for keeping the heat on these elected officials who are not concerned at all with our safety.

COLLABORATION CREDITS

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- **News Director/Managing Editor:** Pete Saiers
- **Executive Producer, Writer, Correspondent, Video Editor:** Julie Watts
- **Photojournalists:** Dennis Lopez, Jay Yoo
- **Digital Journalists:** Richard Ramos, Cecilio Padilla, Allison Wisk

CALMATTERS DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

- **Founder/Managing Editor:** David Leshner
- **Digital Democracy Reporters:** Ryan Sabalow, Sameea Kamal
- **Data Journalist:** Foaad Khosmood

PRODUCTION NOTE:

CalMatters and CBS News California each rolled out a series of stories on our respective platforms between April and December of 2024, culminating with the CBS News California Investigates special "CALIFORNIA'S FENTANYL FIGHT: Politicians V. Parents" which is submitted for your review.

The special first ran on the CBS News streaming and digital channels on Dec 23rd, 2024 and was later redistributed with a New Year's Day 2025 linear TV premiere on all CBS California stations. This reporting is ongoing in 2025.

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POLITICIANS V. PARENTS

We submit for your consideration this year-long investigation, which began as an examination of California's fentanyl fight and evolved into a narrative case study of California's supermajority politics.

Through powerful storytelling, this reporting goes beyond traditional statehouse coverage to translate a complicated and intentionally opaque legislative process for the general viewing audience.

Not only does it serve to educate viewers about the reality of how their elected lawmakers work (or don't work) on their behalf, but this reporting also arms the public and other journalists with the tools to hold lawmakers accountable.

GROUNDBREAKING AI ASSISTED JOURNALISM:

With the help of new artificial intelligence through CalMatters' groundbreaking Digital Democracy database, this investigation provides an unprecedented look at the largely unchecked power of California's one-party supermajority legislature through the eyes of grieving parents who discover how California lawmakers avoid transparency and accountability by killing controversial legislation without voting on the record.

For years, California lawmakers have been allowed to operate without much scrutiny due to a shrinking California Capitol Press Corps and a growing "super(duper)majority" in the state Senate and Assembly. However, in 2024, CalMatters' new Digital Democracy database gave journalists – and members of the public – new access to the inner workings of the Capitol.

This collaboration between CalMatters and 'CBS News California Investigates' combines gripping statehouse investigative reporting with groundbreaking AI-assisted data journalism to provide an unprecedented look at how consequential decisions and votes are made in secret with little trace of responsibility.

AMONG THE DATA FINDINGS:

- A data analysis of more than 1 million votes cast found Democrats in California's legislature vote "no" on average less than 1% of the time.
- At least two current lawmakers had never voted "no" on the record (at the time of initial publication).
- Instead, more than 2,300 bills died without a vote over the past two years through procedural tactics that leave little trace or accountability.
- Of the 2,403 bills that died in the last two-year session, just 25 failed because a majority of lawmakers voted "no."

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THE STORY BEHIND THE DATA

While Digital Democracy enabled us to analyze millions of votes and hundreds of hours of legislative hearings in unprecedented ways, “California’s fentanyl fight” presented a unique opportunity to produce this narrative case study of California’s supermajority politics.

One of the hardest-fought political battles in 2024 happened inside California’s Capitol between a group of grieving parents who lost their kids to fentanyl and a handful of powerful politicians who were opposed to increasing criminal penalties. Relying on deep sourcing and traditional statehouse investigative reporting, CBS News California obtained critical non-public documents, memos, emails, and voicemails that helped reveal the story behind the data.

OBSTACLES OVERCOME

As you might assume, lawmakers weren’t exactly thrilled to discuss their voting records. In some cases, we were forced to physically chase down lawmakers who refused to respond to requests for comment. It was equally challenging to convince cooperative sources to speak candidly on the record. There are, of course, political consequences for public opposition in a supermajority.

From a data perspective, the Digital Democracy team faced issues with data consistency. Some non-standard parts of the official state records make machine readability difficult, and in order to be accurate, they had to manually check (and re-check) many of the votes.

However, the biggest obstacle we faced, from a public service perspective, was finding a way to make our findings understandable for a general viewing audience. “CBS News California Investigates” and “CalMatters Digital Democracy” both launched in 2024 -- each with the goal of making the capitol more transparent by bringing capitol accountability journalism to a broader audience.

In order to do that - especially for a TV audience - we had to successfully translate complicated policy issues for an audience outside of the statehouse.

After the data exposed the legislative concerns, it was incumbent upon us to find examples and stories that would resonate with the average voter/Californian.

Digital democracy gave us unprecedented statehouse data analysis tools, but it was good old-fashioned shoe-leather reporting and thoughtful storytelling that allowed us to demonstrate the real-life implications of our findings for a general audience.