

Statewide Ballot Proposition Elections

October 1997

Background

Since the initiative process was first introduced in California eighty-five years ago, this state's voters have been asked to vote on hundreds of statewide ballot propositions, along with untold numbers of local initiatives.

Those which have appeared on the state ballot during the last twenty years have included such disparate subjects as affirmative action, immigration, term limits for elected officials, open primary elections, campaign financing, securities fraud, marijuana use, auto insurance, health care coverage, euthanasia, environmental issues, agricultural labor relations, school busing, obscenity, the death penalty, gun control, smoking restrictions, and numerous tax-related issues including the momentous 1978 property tax reduction measure, Proposition 13.

Each election has featured a number of ballot proposition contests which evoke fierce battles between sponsors and opponents involving campaign expenditures of tens of millions of dollars.

Because of the growth in the number of initiatives, ballots have gotten longer and longer over the years. Unlike candidate elections, where winners soon take office and losers go off to do something else, many ballot proposition issues are not decided on election day. In recent years the pattern has increasingly seen the losing side of ballot proposition contests appeal to the courts seeking modifications or reversals of the election outcomes. These legal challenges can delay the implementation of an adopted proposition for years, and, if successful, can partially, if not completely, nullify them.

During and following each election campaign, many voters complain about the length of the election ballot and feel they are asked to decide weighty issues which they don't fully understand. Many also rail against the simplistic advertising bombardment directed at them in the weeks before the election. In addition, after the election others are pained by court actions which delay or revoke the decisions made at the ballot box. Nevertheless, Californians have long valued the right to vote on issues directly through the initiative process.

In August of this year, The Field Institute undertook a statewide survey to provide objective measurements about how the California electorate views the basic idea and specific aspects of ballot proposition elections, and what changes voters would like to see made to the process.

Findings in Brief

Despite all the complaints that have been aired about the initiative process, ten times as many California voters say that having statewide ballot proposition elections is a good thing rather than a bad thing (74% to 7%). Another 19% have a mixed view or have no opinion. The voting public's overall favorable regard for the initiative process has remained high over the past two decades.

- Voters like having the opportunity to vote on ballot propositions because they feel it gives them a chance to participate in law-making and to express their feelings about issues. Other positive aspects of the initiative process reported by the public are these: "it allows concerned citizen groups to put things before the voters," and "it takes power out of the hands of a few, allows voters to decide things which legislature is afraid or unable to do."
- However, voters also voice a range of negative or unfavorable things about ballot proposition elections. They don't like the idea that after passage "nothing happens because special interests ask the courts to intervene." In addition, voters recognize that many propositions "are not good law or are unconstitutional," while others believe "the public is not knowledgeable enough to vote on them."
- The three most common sources of information which voters rely on in deciding how to vote on ballot propositions are the official ballot pamphlet, newspapers and television.
- Voters feel that the large majority of statewide ballot propositions today reflect the concerns of organized special interests rather than ordinary individuals. In many instances, voters feel that they do not know which groups of organized interests are supporting or opposing individual propositions.
- Many ballot propositions are not seen as understandable. Seven in ten voters (70%) maintain that only a few or some of the ballot initiatives are understandable to the average voter.
- Only a little more than one-half the voting public (54%) says they vote on all the statewide ballot propositions presented to them at the time they are voting during statewide elections.

Findings in Brief (con't)

- Following are some highlights of how voters react to various changes which have been suggested to reform the initiative system:
 - ... 77% favor placing limits on the amount of money that can be spent by supporters and opponents of initiatives.
 - ... 71% favor requiring sponsors to submit initiatives to Secretary of State for review before signatures are gathered and provide comment as to whether they conform to present law and to evaluate language clarity.
 - ... 53% favor requiring a two-thirds vote instead of a simple majority for a statewide ballot proposition to be enacted
 - ... By a 55% to 44% margin voters oppose limiting the number of propositions that could be voted on in an election.
 - ... A 52% to 42% majority opposes the idea of an indirect initiative, where the legislature first votes on an issue and if it fails to pass, or passes in an unacceptable form, sponsors would then have the option of placing the measure on the next statewide ballot.
 - ... 70% oppose the idea of allowing the state legislature to amend laws passed by ballot proposition.
 - ... Two thirds (67%) of California voters support the idea of establishing ballot proposition elections for the entire country, whereby all U.S. voters could vote directly on matters affecting the nation.

Ballot propositions seen as a good thing

In 1979 The Field Institute first asked California voters how they felt about the idea of having statewide ballot elections. At that time more than four in five voters (83%) described them as a good thing. While the level of positive appraisal of ballot propositions has gone down slightly in the intervening years, there is still a sizeable majority (74%) who believe that overall they are a good thing. The lowest endorsement of ballot propositions (68%) occurred in a 1990 survey taken during an election campaign which featured an unusually large number of initiatives and counter-initiatives.

Table 1

Statewide Ballot Propositions — Good Thing or Bad Thing					
	1997	1990	1989	1982	1979
	%	%	%	%	%
Good thing	74	68	75	81	83
Bad thing	7	9	6	6	4
No difference	17	20	12	9	11
No opinion	3	3	7	4	2

What voters like about proposition elections

One reason above all is cited by voters as to what they think is the best thing about ballot proposition elections. Almost one-half (46%) offer some variation of the following reason: *“it gives people a voice, a chance to give their opinions, to participate in law making, to show how they feel about issues.”*

Voters also express an assortment of other reasons, none of which is offered by more than 8%. They include: *“allows concerned citizen groups to put things before the voters... allows for greater opportunities for change”* (8%); *“takes power out of the hands of a few, the legislature, it is direct participation instead of indirect through legislature* (8%); *“it makes people read up on the issues, makes voters more aware, makes them think more, increases voter interest in politics and political matters”* (7%); *“voters can decide things the legislature is afraid or unable to... it forces the issue... voters can get things done”* (5%); *“voter decisions benefit the state, it’s good politics”* (3%); and *“enables citizens to get the attention of the legislature, political groups”* (2%).

A little more than one in five voters (22%) could not volunteer any specific positive comments as to what they liked best about proposition elections.

What voters dislike about proposition elections

Voters offer a wide variety of things that they dislike about ballot proposition elections. In rank order they are: *“after some are voted into effect nothing happens, laws are not enforced, too easily overturned by the courts or special interests”* (17%); *“public is not knowledgeable enough to vote on them, voters don’t have all the information, can’t make an informed choice”* (7%); *“ads used in proposition campaigns are misleading”* (7%); *“too confusing, complicated, misleading, too wordy, legalistic”* (7%); *“too many of them are on the ballot”* (6%); *“many propositions are poorly thought out, not good law, unconstitutional”* (5%); *“not enough people vote, not a good reflection of the public’s mind”* (4%); *“there are too many special interest initiatives”* (3%); *“they are becoming too expensive, too many ads”* (3%); *“too much to read, clutters the ballot, makes voting take too long”* (1%); *“signature gathering is not always legitimate, people sign them without reading petitions”* (1%); and *“legislature should decide, they are passing the buck”* (1%). Seven percent of voters offer other negative reasons, but none of these add to more than 1%.

Three in ten voters (30%) could not offer any negative comments about proposition elections.

Ballot initiatives not understandable

Seven in ten voters (70%) maintain that only a few or some of the ballot initiatives are understandable to the average voter. Just one in twenty (5%) believe that all ballot initiatives are understandable, while another 24% say that most of them are.

	All voters %	Democrats %	Republicans %	Others %
All	5	2	7	5
Most	24	22	25	30
Only some	41	42	39	46
Only few	29	33	28	19
No opinion	1	1	1	*

* less than 1/2 of 1%

Frequency of voting on ballot propositions

A little more than one-half (54%) of the voting public say they vote on all the ballot propositions that are presented to them at the time they are voting in statewide elections. Another 30% state that they vote on most propositions. About one in seven (15%) maintain that they vote on only a few, and 1% say they vote on none of them.

Proportionately more Republicans than Democrats say they vote on all of the ballot propositions put before them.

	All voters %	Democrats %	Republicans %	Others %
All	54	47	59	60
Most	30	31	30	26
Only few	15	19	11	11
None	1	2	*	2
No answer	*	1	*	1

* less than 1/2 of 1%

Sources of information about ballot propositions

Voters cite the official ballot pamphlet first as the most useful source of information in deciding about statewide ballot propositions. Television and newspapers follow as useful sources of information. To a lesser extent, friends/relatives, mailers, the Internet, radio and other sources are cited as useful.

The ballot pamphlet is the most useful source of information among Republicans. For Democrats it is television.

Table 4
Most useful source of information in deciding about statewide ballot propositions (first mention)

	All voters %	Democrats %	Republicans %	Others %
Official ballot pamphlet	36	28	42	40
Television	22	30	15	15
Newspapers	17	19	13	25
Mailers	7	6	9	3
Friends / relatives	6	6	7	5
The Internet	4	4	2	7
Radio	3	2	5	3
Other	4	3	6	2
No answer	1	1	*	*

* less than 1/2 of 1%

When voters' first and second mentions of the most useful source of information are combined, the three sources mentioned as being most useful are the official ballot pamphlet, newspapers and television.

Table 5
Most useful source of information in deciding about statewide ballot propositions (first and second mentions combined)

	All voters %	Democrats %	Republicans %	Others %
Official ballot pamphlet	48	41	51	58
Newspapers	44	47	38	51
Television	43	49	39	33
Friends / relatives	19	19	21	15
Mailers	13	12	15	8
Radio	13	14	12	14
Internet	9	8	8	14
Other	8	6	13	2
No answer	3	4	3	5

Note: Percentages add to 200% because first and second mentions are combined

Special interest concerns reflected

By a 59% to 19% margin voters believe that statewide ballot propositions are more reflective of the concerns of organized special interests groups rather than ordinary individuals.

Table 6
Do statewide ballot propositions reflect concerns of average voter or organized special interest groups?

	All voters %	Democrats %	Republicans %	Others %
Special interest groups	59	58	58	67
Ordinary individuals	19	22	18	12
Mixed / both	18	15	23	17
No opinion	4	5	2	4

However, 58% of voters feel that only some of the time, rarely or never do they know which groups or organized special interests are supporting or opposing individual propositions on statewide election ballots.

Proportionately more Democrats than Republicans feel they do not know which special interests are supporting or opposing individual statewide ballot propositions.

Table 7

How much of the time do you feel you know which groups of organized special interests are supporting/opposing individual propositions on statewide election ballots?

	All voters %	Democrats %	Republicans %	Others %
All of the time	5	5	5	6
Most of the time	34	26	42	35
Some of the time	41	47	36	38
Rarely	15	17	12	17
Never	2	2	1	2
No opinion	3	2	4	2

Limit the amount of proposition campaign spending

All voters, irrespective of party registration, are strongly in favor of placing limits on the amount of money that can be spent by supporters or opponents of statewide ballot propositions.

Table 8

Place limits on amount of money that can be spent by supporters and opponents of statewide ballot proposition

	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
All voters	77%	20	3
Democrats	82%	13	5
Republicans	73%	26	1
Others	75%	23	2

Submit initiatives for review before signature gathering

California voters heavily favor the idea (71% to 24%) of requiring sponsors to submit an initiative to the Secretary of State so that it can be reviewed as to whether it conforms with present law and for an evaluation of the clarity of language before signatures are gathered.

Table 9

Require sponsors to submit initiative to Secretary of State for review and comment as to whether it conforms with present law ad to evaluate clarity in language before signatures are gathered

	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
All voters	71%	24	5
Democrats	70%	21	9
Republicans	77%	22	1
Others	60%	36	4

Require a two-thirds vote?

Voters divide 53% in favor and 42% against the idea of requiring a two-thirds vote instead of a simple majority vote to enact a ballot initiative. This overall division of opinion masks a big partisan split on this matter. Democrats heavily favor the idea of raising the passage level of propositions to a two-thirds majority (67% to 30%), while Republicans are opposed 52% to 43%. Voters not affiliated with either major party are also in opposition 53% to 38%.

Table 10

Require two-thirds vote instead of simple majority for a statewide ballot proposition to be enacted

	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
All voters	53%	42	5
Democrats	67%	30	4
Republicans	43%	52	5
Others	38%	53	9

Limit the number of statewide ballot propositions

The voting public is also narrowly divided about limiting the number of statewide ballot propositions appearing on the ballot.

Table 11

Limit the number of statewide propositions that could be voted on in an election

	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
All voters	44%	55	1
Democrats	44%	55	1
Republicans	50%	50	—
Others	29%	69	2

* less than 1/2 of 1%

Indirect initiative narrowly opposed

Another initiative process change which has been discussed and debated over the years is the so-called “indirect initiative.” This is where the change being proposed in an initiative is first voted on by the state legislature. If the legislature fails to pass the initiative or passes it in an unacceptable form, sponsors would then have the option of placing it on the statewide election ballot.

Overall, California voters oppose this proposal by a narrow margin — 52% to 42%. Republicans are strongly opposed 58% to 37%, while Democrats are about evenly divided. Those voters not affiliated with either of the two major parties are opposed 55% to 39%.

Table 12

Opinion of an “indirect initiative” where the issue is first voted on by state legislature. If legislature fails to pass it or it passes in an unacceptable form, sponsors would then have option of placing it on next statewide election ballot

	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
All voters	42%	52	6
Democrats	47%	45	8
Republicans	37%	58	5
Others	39%	55	6

Don’t allow legislature to amend ballot propositions

Voters are strongly opposed to the idea of allowing the state legislature to amend laws that are passed by ballot initiative. While Republicans are opposed by an overwhelming margin of 77% to 22%, Democrats are also strongly opposed (62% to 33%).

Table 13

Allow state legislature to amend laws passed by ballot proposition?

	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
All voters	27%	70	3
Democrats	33%	62	5
Republicans	22%	77	1
Others	20%	73	7

Paid signature gatherers not a bad thing

By a 51% to 35% margin, voters believe that permitting paid signature gatherers to help qualify initiatives is a good thing.

Table 14

Good or bad thing to permit paid signature gatherers to help qualify initiatives

	Good thing	Bad thing	Mixed	No opinion
All voters	51%	35	8	6
Democrats	49%	39	8	4
Republicans	54%	30	9	7
Others	49%	36	7	8

Support for ballot proposition elections for the U.S.

California voters very much like the idea of establishing the ballot proposition process for the entire country, so that all U.S. voters would be asked to vote on issues affecting the nation. Support is strong for this idea among voters irrespective of their partisanship.

Table 15

Establish ballot proposition process for entire country whereby all U.S. voters would be asked to vote on matters affecting the nation

	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
All voters	67%	30	3
Democrats	59%	36	5
Republicans	71%	27	2
Others	78%	18	4

About the Survey

The findings in this report are based on a survey conducted August 14-24, 1997 among a representative statewide sample of 1,007 adult Californians, of whom 753 were registered voters. Of the total registered voters, 351 were Democrats, 291 Republicans and 111 were registered with a minority party or declined to state. The interviewing was completed by telephone in either English or Spanish.

The sampling was performed using random digit dialing methods which give all voters statewide an equal chance of being selected for the survey. Once a household telephone number had been selected for inclusion in the sample, up to four calls (initial call plus three-callbacks) were made in an attempt to conduct and complete an interview.

Estimates of sampling error relate to sample size. According to statistical theory, 95% of the time results from the overall voter sample would be accurate within +/- 3.5 percentage points. Sampling tolerances would be greater for percentage distributions based on the Democratic, Republican and others sub-samples.

There are many possible sources of error in any survey other than sampling variability. Different results could occur because of differences in question wording, question sequencing or through undetected errors or omissions in sampling, interviewing or data processing. Every effort was made to minimize such possible errors.

Prior year results are based on previous Field Institute surveys conducted in a comparable manner.

Professor John M. Allswang, CSU-Los Angeles and Professor Edward L. Lascher Jr., CSU-Sacramento, assisted in the development of the survey questionnaire.

About The Field Institute

Background

The Field Institute is a non-partisan research organization supported by media, academic institutions, foundations and others for the purpose of conducting public opinion research on a variety of social, economic and political issues. The Institute undertakes regularly scheduled opinion and attitude surveys each year on a variety of topics as well as *ad hoc* studies in California, its primary area of focus. Revenue received by The Institute goes entirely toward covering the cost of its operations and in disseminating its reports. It is a not-for-profit organization.

The Institute's services are available to all sectors of the public. In addition to its own ongoing research programs, it accepts research contracts from public or private organizations but not from partisan interests. All data from Institute studies are archived for use by scholars, policy makers, and other persons or organizations. Archived data sets are available from more than 200 studies conducted by The Field Institute and *The Field Poll* since 1956.

Field Research Corporation Relationship

The Field Institute was established in 1976 with funds and support from Field Research Corporation. FRC has contributed to The Institute all of the operations of *The Field Poll*, including its data archive going back to 1947. FRC's staff of more than sixty-five full-time professional and operations people, together with its large corps of experienced interviewers and its extensive in-house computer capability, provides basic data gathering and data processing services for The Institute on a sub-contract basis.

The Institute's revenue comes from a variety of sources which fall into four main areas: media sponsors, academic sponsors, underwriters of ad hoc studies and mailing list subscribers.

Field Poll Media Sponsors

A number of leading California media properties (newspapers and television stations) contribute to the operations of The Field Institute as sponsors of *The Field Poll*. Each media property pays an annual fee commensurate with its circulation or audience size.

Academic Consortium

The Institute's Academic Consortium serves institutions of higher learning on an annual contract basis. The Institute provides Consortium members data files and codebooks of surveys undertaken by The Institute which are widely used for instruction and research. Current members include the nine campuses of the University of California system and the twenty-two campuses of the California State University system.

Underwriters of Ad Hoc Studies

Special *ad hoc* studies are frequently underwritten by sponsors from foundations, government and institutions. The subjects for study are generally those in public policy areas where The Institute's demonstrated objectivity can contribute to a greater understanding of a problem.

Mailing List Subscribers

A variety of individuals and organizations pay an annual fee of \$250 to receive all copies of *The Field Poll* and *California Opinion Index* reports. This fee covers mailing and postage allowing for a portion of the proceeds to go into the Institute's operating fund.

The Field Poll

The Field Poll was established in 1947 as *The California Poll* by Mervin Field and has operated continuously since that time. It is a unique, state-wide public opinion news feature service covering a wide range of political and social topics. Surveys are made at frequent intervals throughout the year. Continuing measures are made of voter support for leading political figures vying for major state and federal elected offices, job ratings of important political figures, and reactions to significant political events. Voter awareness, understanding and predispositions for major campaign issues and controversial ballot propositions are also tracked over time.

The Field Poll issues from forty to sixty reports per year. Each *Field Poll* release consists of three to ten double-spaced 8 1/2" x 11" pages of text and statistical data, plus a background sheet showing the details about the interviewing method, sample size, question wording, and other special technical data.

The California Opinion Index

The California Opinion Index regularly charts public attitudes on such issues as taxes and government spending, economic well-being, crime, immigration, education and the schools, political demography, the initiative process and other important state issues.

Each *California Opinion Index* report is printed in a four to eight page newsletter format.

Officers

Officers of The Field Institute are Mervin Field, Mark DiCamillo and Dr. E. Deborah Jay.