



A digest summarizing public opinion on the efficacy of...

Legislation by Initiative vs. through Elected Representatives

November 1999

Background

The initiative process was adopted in California in the early 1900's through the efforts of a popular reform-minded Governor, Hiram Johnson. Johnson envisioned the initiative as a way for voters to by-pass a sometimes corrupt Legislature beholden to special interests and big money.

Since California's first statewide initiative in 1912, voters have been asked to decide upon the fate of nearly 300 different initiatives and referenda, which have qualified for the ballot through the collection of voter petitions. Over this same period, Californians have voted on approximately 750 other statewide propositions placed on the ballot by the legislature, in the form of bond issues or legislative measures seeking voter approval. In recent years there have been increasing complaints from the public, legislators, the courts, and the media that proposition elections and the initiative process have accumulated many serious flaws.

Criticism has ranged from the belief that rather than being a tool for the grassroots to redress a legislative wrong, the initiative has become a device for special interests to thwart the legislature and the public. Others claim that too many propositions are put before the voters in most elections. For example, as many as 21 propositions (including 11 initiatives) are expected to appear on the March 2000 primary ballot. In addition, many deal with complex issues rarely understood by the average voter. Because of this, organized campaigns tend to reduce the issues to simplified and often misleading advertising campaigns. What's more, many of the initiatives approved by the voters are subsequently voided or altered by the courts, because they are ruled to have been improperly drafted or are unconstitutional.

Over the years the California public has voted on ballot propositions covering such broad substantive issues as taxes and bond measures, water use, land use, health issues, environmental problems, school and higher education issues, transportation, term limits for legislators, immigration, casino gambling, campaign contributions, and reapportionment. It has also been asked to decide upon a myriad of other less significant topics as the regulation of boxing and wrestling matches, bingo and repealing mountain lions' status as a protected mammal.

The Field Institute has tracked Californians' attitudes toward statewide proposition elections since 1979. In this issue the scope of the questioning has been expanded to see how voters feel about the efficacy of legislation in the hands of elected representatives, the courts and the voting public.

Ballot proposition elections still seen as a good thing

The Field Institute has tracked public attitudes toward the statewide ballot proposition elections for the past two decades using the simple question of whether or not people think such elections are a good thing or a bad thing overall. Over that time period, a large majority of the public has consistently voiced support for this method of expressing the public will.

Currently, about six in ten (62%) California adults think ballot propositions are a good thing, compared to only 8% who feel that propositions are a bad thing. This is the smallest proportion expressing a favorable opinion of ballot proposition elections since measurements first began in 1979.

Table 1

Trend of overall opinions of the California public toward statewide ballot proposition elections

	Good thing	No difference	Bad thing	No opinion
1999	62%	25	8	5
1997	74%	17	7	2
1989	75%	12	6	7
1982	81%	9	6	4
1979	83%	11	4	2

Elected representatives vs. voting public

In the current survey Californians were asked who was better suited to decide on various policy matters — their elected representatives in the legislature or the voting public through ballot propositions.

On some matters, large majorities believe that elected representatives are better suited than the voting electorate. For example, 66% believe the legislature is better suited to decide upon highly technical or legal policy matters and 60% feel it gives a more thorough review to particular aspects of proposed laws than does the voting public. In addition, half (50%) thinks elected representatives generally enact more coherent and well thought-out government policies, compared to 31% who say this of the voting public.

The public is evenly divided (44% to 45%) over who is better suited to decide upon large scale government programs or projects. However, on other issues, the public sees voters as likely to do a better job than their elected representatives.

For example, majorities believe the voting public rather than the legislature can be trusted more often to do what is right on important government issues (by a 58% to 26% margin) and are more likely to consider the broad public interest in making its decisions (54% to 28%). The public also believes, by a 70% to 19% margin, that their elected representatives are more influenced by special interests than is the voting public.

Public opinion has not changed much from what it was in 1982 when these issues were last measured. One exception is that in 1982 the public was more divided in its opinion of whether elected representatives or the voting public generally enacted more coherent and well thought-out government policies, whereas now a clear majority believes the legislature is more likely to do a better job.

Table 2

Which body — elected representatives or the voting public — does this better describe?

		Elected reps	Voting public	No opinion
More influenced by special interest groups	1999	70%	19	11
	1982	64%	29	7
Better suited to decide upon highly technical or legal policy matters	1999	66%	23	11
	1982	66%	27	7
Gives more thorough review to each particular aspect of a proposed law	1999	60%	27	13
	1982	58%	35	7
Generally enacts more coherent and well thought-out government policies	1999	50%	31	19
	1982	48%	42	10
Better suited to decide upon large scale government programs or projects	1999	44%	45	11
	1982	48%	42	10
Can be trusted more often to do what is right on important government issues	1999	26%	58	16
	1982	26%	63	11
Considers the broad public interest more in making decisions	1999	28%	54	18
	1982	NA	NA	NA

NA: Not asked in 1982

Public interest vs. special interests

Majorities of California adults currently perceive the decisions made by the Governor (57%) and state legislature (62%) as being more responsive to special interests than to what most people want, regardless of who is serving in office or which political party is in control.

Currently, a plurality (42%) of Californians feels that the decisions of the state Supreme Court come out the way most people want, while 35% believe their decisions are generally more responsive to special interests.

About four in ten adults think that statewide ballot proposition elections generally come out the way most people want (42%) and a similar proportion (43%) feel they tend to come out the way organized special interests want.

Table 3

Do the decisions made by the Governor/State Legislature/State Supreme Court/statewide ballot propositions generally come out the way most people want or the way special interests want?

	Governor	State legis- lature	State Supreme Court	Ballot propo- sitions
Special interests	57%	62%	35%	43%
Most people want	22	22	42	42
Mixed results	12	8	11	8
No opinion	9	8	12	7

Governor

Cynicism about the responsiveness of the state's executive branch is widespread and is not restricted to any one party. Only about one in seven Republicans (16%) or those unaffiliated with either of the major parties (16%) feels that decisions made by the Governor come out the way most people want. Only a slightly larger proportion of Democrats (27%) feels this way. Among all the partisan subgroups, the majority view is that decisions made by the Governor generally come out the way special interests want rather than for the people.

Table 4

Regardless of who is serving, decisions made by the Governor generally come out the way most people want or the way special interests want — by party

	Statewide	Democrats	Republicans	Other
Special interests	57%	51%	66%	55%
Most people want	22	27	16	16
Mixed results	12	14	10	10
No opinion	9	8	8	19

State Legislature

Sixty percent or more of Democrats, Republicans and others feel that the decisions of the state legislature generally come out the way special interests want regardless of which party is in power.

Table 5

Regardless of which party is in power, do decisions made by the State Legislature generally come out the way most people want or the way special interests want — by party?

	Statewide	Democrats	Republicans	Other
Special interests	62%	63%	60%	62%
Most people want	22	20	27	15
Mixed results	8	9	7	10
No opinion	8	8	6	13

State Supreme Court

Overall, a plurality of Californians believe that decisions made by the State Supreme Court reflect more of what the public wants than that of special interests. Democrats are more likely to feel that the state Supreme Court's decisions generally come out the way most people want (47% to 31%). Among Republicans, opinions are about evenly divided (40% to 39%). Among those not affiliated with either party, more believe special interests generally prevail (36%) than believe the will of the people is being served (27%).

Table 6

Do the decisions made by the State Supreme Court generally come out the way most people want or the way special interests want — by party?

	Statewide	Democrats	Republicans	Other
Most people want	42%	47%	40%	27%
Special interests	35	31	39	36
Mixed results	11	10	8	20
No opinion	12	12	13	17

How often are legislators making informed choices?

Only a third (33%) of Californians believe that state legislators find out enough about the legislation before them to make well informed choices all or most of the time. This compares to 47% who feel that legislators have enough information only some of the time and one in eight (13%) who thinks this hardly ever happens. There are no significant differences by party on this question.

Table 7

How much of the time do state legislators find out enough about the legislation before them to make the best choices?

	Statewide	Democrats	Republicans	Other
Nearly all the time	6%	8%	4%	5%
Most of the time	27	27	27	26
Some of the time	47	48	46	44
Hardly ever	13	12	15	14
No opinion	7	5	8	11

People who believe the decisions of legislators generally come out the way special interests want, rather than the way the public wants, are also more likely to believe that state legislators find out enough information about legislation only some of the time or hardly ever.

Table 8

How much of the time do state legislators find out enough about the legislation before them to make the best choices?

	Statewide	Say decisions benefit most people	Say decisions benefit special interests
Nearly all the time	6%	14%	3%
Most of the time	27	38	23
Some of the time	47	39	51
Hardly ever	13	5	17
No opinion	7	4	6

Public's view of how informed voters are when voting

Fewer than one fourth of California adults feel that voters nearly always or mostly have enough information when deciding among candidates running Governor (24%) or the state legislature (18%). The dominant view held by about half of the public, is that voters find out enough information to make informed choices about such candidates only some of the time. Significant proportions — 24% in the case of gubernatorial elections and 33% regarding state legislative races — believe that voters hardly ever have enough information to make the best choices.

Majorities ranging from 71% to 79% feel that voters get enough information only some of the time or hardly ever when voting for Governor, state legislators, and on ballot propositions.

Table 9

How much of the time do voters find out enough information about each of the following to make informed decisions?

	Candidates running for		
	Governor	State Legislature	Ballot Propositions
Nearly all the time	6%	4%	6%
Most of the time	18	14	21
Some of the time	50	46	53
Hardly ever	24	33	18
No opinion	2	3	2

The findings in this report are based on interviews with 1,010 California adults conducted August 16-22, 1999 by The Field Institute. Associate Professor Ted Lascher of CSU-Sacramento assisted in the development of the survey questionnaire.

The survey was completed by telephone in English and Spanish using random digit dialing methods. The sample was selected according to probability principles and reflects a reliable representation of the California adult public. Percentages based on the total sample have a sampling error of +/- 3.2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Findings from survey subgroups would have larger error estimates.

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

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.

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 fifty 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, as well as mailing list and on-line 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.

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.

Statewide 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.

From these surveys *The Field Poll* issues from forty to sixty reports per year. Each *Field Poll* release consists of three to twelve 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 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 and are provided to mailing list subscribers of *The Field Poll* at no additional cost.

Availability of Reports

All *Field Poll* and *California Opinion Index* reports are available to individuals or organizations on an annual basis for a fee of \$250. There are two methods of report transmission.

By Mail

Reports are mailed to subscribers the day before its publication date and are usually received the day of or the day after publication.

On-line

Subscriptions can be ordered on-line through the web site of www.politicalaccess.com. Subscribers are provided a password to access *Field Poll* reports at 9:00 a.m. on the day of their publication. Previously issued on-line reports can also be accessed from this site at no cost.

Officers

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