

How Do Californians Use Local Ballot Initiatives?

Controversy over California's statewide ballot propositions tends to overshadow the uses of direct democracy at the local level—despite the fact that roughly 70 percent of Americans live in cities where citizens can use local ballot initiatives to decide major policy issues. Historically, California is a leader in local direct democracy. Voters in all California cities and counties have access to the initiative, and Californians are more likely than other U.S. citizens to exercise this power. In the November 2000 election, for example, over half of all U.S. local measures relating to growth and development appeared on California ballots.

In *The Local Initiative in California*, PPIC research fellow Tracy Gordon provides the most comprehensive evaluation of the local initiative to date. Drawing on previously unexplored data, her report examines trends and patterns in local initiatives and investigates their causes and policy consequences. In general, Gordon finds that the complaints leveled at statewide direct democracy are less applicable to the local initiative process as Californians use it today.

Key Findings

Local experience with direct democracy is wide but not deep. Over 730 local initiatives were circulated for signatures in California between 1990 and 2000 (see the table). More than half of all cities and three-quarters of all counties

	No. of Initiatives	No. of Jurisdictions	% Qualified	% Approved
State	450	1	15	40
Cities	576	243	75	45
Counties	156	45	78	42

SOURCES: California Secretary of State, *A History of California Initiatives*, Sacramento, California, December 2002; *Report on Municipal Initiative Measures*, Sacramento, California, 1990–2002.

NOTE: Percent approved is based on initiatives that qualified for the ballot.

Local initiatives are more numerous, more likely to qualify, and more likely to become law than are statewide initiatives.

had at least one proposed citizen measure. However, initiative activity was concentrated in just a few jurisdictions. At the extreme, 54 initiatives were circulated for signatures in the city and county of San Francisco, whereas the average city had 1.2 and the average county had 2.7 initiatives during the 1990s. The majority of local initiatives were proposed in the Bay Area and South Coast regions of the state.

Local initiatives are more successful than statewide measures at the ballot box. Local initiatives are more likely than their statewide counterparts to qualify for the ballot and to pass into law (see the table). Nearly 80 percent of county initiatives and 75 percent of city initiatives qualified for the ballot between 1990 and 2000, compared to 15 percent of statewide measures. Of initiatives that qualified for the ballot, voters approved 42 percent of county measures and 45 percent of city measures, compared to 40 percent of statewide measures. Initiatives were most likely to qualify for the ballot and to pass into law in statewide primary elections and non-concurrent local elections, when more interested and informed voters may be more likely to participate.

Local initiatives address typically local concerns. The most popular topics for local initiatives in the 1990s were land use, governance, and safety. Land use measures addressed both traditional planning issues—such as zoning changes and specific projects (40%)—as well as newer growth management techniques, including urban growth boundaries (35%), voter approval requirements for new development (12%), and open space preservation (10%). Governance initiatives sought to implement political reforms—including campaign finance rules and term limits (32%)—and to modify the timing and administration of local elections (26%) or local government structure and organization (19%).

In cities, local initiatives concerning gambling, land use, transportation, and the environment were the most likely to qualify for the ballot, but voters were most likely to approve measures relating to water, facilities, and taxes. At the county level, qualification rates were highest for environment, water, and general services initiatives, whereas approval

rates were highest for transportation, governance, and facilities measures.

Local initiatives are common where institutional barriers are low. Charter cities have wide latitude in setting the requirements to qualify an initiative for the ballot. Cities that require fewer signatures had more initiatives during the 1990s than did cities that follow the California Elections Code, which requires signatures from 10 percent of registered voters to qualify a measure for the next regularly scheduled election and signatures from 15 percent to call a special election within 88 to 103 days. Those with higher signature requirements or shorter circulation periods had fewer initiatives.

Local initiatives are most common in large, growing, and economically diverse cities. Voters are more likely to turn to the ballot box for policymaking in large cities with big governments. All else being equal, cities at or above the 75th percentile of population (53,000 residents), for example, could expect 80 percent more initiatives than cities at or below the 25th percentile (7,300 residents). Initiatives are also more common in cities with high proportions of Democratic or Independent voters. Cities with greater income diversity have more initiatives, whereas those with greater racial diversity have fewer. Finally, cities with greater residential mobility, or fewer persons living in the same house for more than five years, have more citizen measures.

Gordon notes that these characteristics may reflect uncertainty among legislators and voters. Larger populations, lower political party affiliation, greater income diversity, and

higher residential mobility can make it difficult for elected representatives to anticipate the needs of their constituents. Similarly, voters may be less able to monitor the behavior of their elected representatives in larger jurisdictions. Many traditional determinants of voter participation (for example, income, age, and homeownership rates) have little bearing on the number of proposed initiatives—perhaps because the threat of an initiative tends to bring public policies in line with voter preferences.

Cities in which voters have proposed at least one initiative tend to have higher local revenues. Cities with at least one proposed initiative during the 1990s had higher per capita own-source revenues in fiscal year 2000–2001, and this relationship persists even after controlling for other city characteristics. Previous research has suggested that states with the local initiative process tend to spend less and rely more on fees and charges for their revenue. At the city level, however, there is no strong relationship between initiative use and per capita expenditures or fees and charges as a percentage of own-source revenues.

In conclusion, Gordon finds little evidence that the local initiative has become a “fourth branch of government.” The major criticisms of the statewide initiative—for example, that it benefits special interests, depresses turnout, or tramples minority rights—do not seem to apply to the local initiative. Local voters appear to use this process to tackle issues that are not adequately resolved by their elected representatives or by state policy, and there is no evidence that it leaves the average voter worse off.

This research brief summarizes a report by Tracy M. Gordon, The Local Initiative in California (2004, 96 pp., \$10.00, ISBN 1-58213-085-X). The report may be ordered by phone at (800) 232-5343 [U.S. mainland] or (415) 291-4400 [Canada, Hawaii, overseas]. A copy of the full text is also available on the Internet (www.ppic.org). The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.
