

CALIFORNIA'S INITIATIVE PROCESS: 100 YEARS OLD

Mark Baldassare, Dean Bonner, Sonja Petek, Jui Shrestha

► The citizens' initiative process in California turns 100 this year.

In 1911, California became the 10th state to enact the citizens' initiative process. Since 1912, 342 citizens' initiatives have appeared on the state's ballots, with 115 (34%) receiving voter approval. The number of initiatives per decade has grown recently, with about 60 in each of the past two decades, compared to 44 in the 1980s and 22 in the 1970s. Some of these initiatives have effected major policy changes in the state—for example, Proposition 13 in 1978, limiting property taxes (65% approval); Proposition 98 in 1988, mandating a minimum percentage of the state budget to be spent on K–14 education (50.7% approval); and Proposition 140 in 1990, limiting the number of terms state senators and representatives can remain in office (52.2% approval).

► Californians think voters make better public policy decisions than elected officials ...

In recent PPIC statewide surveys, a solid majority of Californians (75%) believe that it is a good thing that voters can make laws and change public policies by passing initiatives. Six in 10 Californians and likely voters (62% each) say that public policy decisions made through the initiative process are probably better than those made by the governor and state legislature, with majorities across parties agreeing that voters' decisions are probably better: Republicans (65%), independents (63%), Democrats (58%).

► ... but they also believe that changes are needed in the initiative process.

Six in 10 Californians are either very satisfied (12%) or somewhat satisfied (50%) with the way the initiative process is working in California today, while 30% are not satisfied. However, most Californians (76%) think that the initiative process needs either major changes (39%) or minor changes (37%); only 18% say it is fine the way it is. More than seven in 10 Democrats, Republicans, and independents think that either major or minor changes are needed. One likely factor contributing to this attitude is that over half of all Californians (54%) think the initiative process is controlled a lot by special interests, comparable to 56% in 2005 and 52% in 2001.

► Californians support many specific ideas for reforming the initiative process.

Most Californians (81%) favor having a period of time in which the initiative sponsor and the legislature could meet to discuss a compromise solution before an initiative is placed on the ballot, and 80% favor increasing public disclosure of the funding sources supporting signature gathering and initiative campaigns. At least 70% of Californians have shown support for these two proposals since 2005. Most Californians (73%) favor requiring any initiative that creates new programs or reduces taxes to identify a specific funding source. Sixty-eight percent favor having a system of review and revision of proposed initiatives to try to avoid legal issues and drafting errors, comparable to past years (at least 70% since 2005). A majority (57%) also favor allowing initiatives only in November general elections (a proposal recently passed by the state legislature and awaiting the governor to veto or sign). There is strong bipartisan support for all of these proposals.

► Voters are using initiatives to shape the way their government works.

In recent years, Californians have enacted several important governance reforms at the ballot box. Proposition 11 (2008 ballot, 50.9% approval) created a Citizens Redistricting Commission, and Proposition 20 (2010 ballot, 61.3% approval) assigned the responsibility of redrawing congressional districts to the commission. Proposition 25 changed the legislative requirement for passing a budget from a two-thirds vote to a simple majority (2010 ballot, 55.1% approval). And in 2012, Californians will be voting on several significant initiatives, including one that would reduce the number of years an elected official can serve in the state legislature from 14 years to 12.



		All Adults	Party Registration			Likely Voters
			Dem	Rep	Ind	
Overall, do you think public policy decisions made through the initiative process by California voters are probably better or probably worse than public policy decisions made by the governor and state legislature?	Probably better	62%	58%	65%	63%	62%
	Probably worse	23	27	16	24	23
	Same (volunteered)	6	5	8	5	6
	Don't know	10	10	11	7	9
Do you think the citizens' initiative process in California is in need of major changes, minor changes, or that it is basically fine the way it is?	Major changes	39	39	33	39	37
	Minor changes	37	40	41	40	40
	Fine the way it is	18	17	19	16	17
	Don't know	5	4	7	5	5
Overall, how much would you say that the initiative process in California today is controlled by special interests—a lot, some, or not at all?	A lot	54	66	66	55	70
	Some	34	26	26	35	24
	Not at all	6	5	5	5	4
	Don't know	6	3	3	5	2
Would you favor or oppose having a period of time in which the initiative sponsor and the legislature could meet to see if there is a compromise solution before initiatives go to the ballot?	Favor	81	86	81	78	83
	Oppose	16	11	15	19	14
	Don't know	4	3	3	3	3
Would you favor or oppose increasing public disclosure of funding sources for signature gathering and initiative campaigns?	Favor	80	83	82	81	86
	Oppose	15	14	11	14	10
	Don't know	5	3	7	5	4
Would you favor or oppose requiring initiatives which create new programs or reduce taxes to identify a specific funding source?	Favor	73	74	75	74	76
	Oppose	17	16	16	14	15
	Don't know	10	10	9	12	9
Would you favor or oppose having a system of review and revision of proposed initiatives to try to avoid legal issues and drafting errors?	Favor	68	68	64	71	70
	Oppose	19	20	17	19	18
	Don't know	14	12	19	10	12
Would you favor or oppose only allowing initiatives in November general elections instead of in any statewide election, such as primaries or special elections?	Favor	57	60	56	53	59
	Oppose	35	33	35	40	35
	Don't know	7	8	8	7	7

Note: Likely voters are registered voters meeting criteria on interest in politics, attention to issues, voting behavior, and intention to vote. For a full description of these criteria, see <http://www.ppic.org/content/other/SurveyMethodology.pdf>.

Sources: PPIC Statewide Surveys: May 2011 (includes 2,005 adults, 989 likely voters) and September 2011 (includes 2,002 adults, 958 likely voters). California Secretary of State.

Contact: surveys@ppic.org

