

Is the Initiative Process Fair to Nonwhite Voters?

California relies heavily on direct democracy to make major policy decisions. Since 1970, the number of initiatives per ballot has almost tripled, and voters recently have used direct democracy to decide the fate of drug policy, property taxes, environmental regulation, and school vouchers. Partly because campaign spending on initiatives far outweighs spending on congressional elections in the state, some observers have argued that direct democracy is quickly replacing the legislature as the most important law-making institution in the state.

This growing reliance on direct democracy has raised concerns about the role of race and ethnicity in the initiative process. Although non-Hispanic whites no longer constitute a majority of the state's population, they cast nearly two-thirds of the votes in initiative elections. The racial and ethnic implications of certain initiatives have also drawn criticism. Some observers point to measures on restricting bilingual education, ending affirmative action, and cutting services to illegal immigrants as a sign that the white electoral majority is using direct democracy to target the state's growing nonwhite population.

Have whites dominated these elections at the expense of Latinos, Asian Americans, and African Americans? In *Are There Winners and Losers? Race, Ethnicity, and California's Initiative Process*, Zoltan Hajnal and Hugh Louch answer this question by analyzing voting patterns in initiative elections over the last 20 years. Specifically, they calculate the likelihood that voters from different racial, ethnic, and demographic groups voted for the winning side on all initiatives during that period. They also calculate this likelihood for three subsets of initiatives:

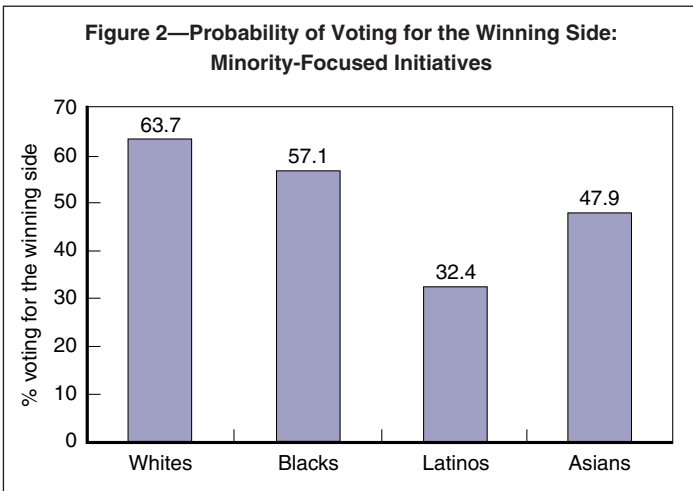
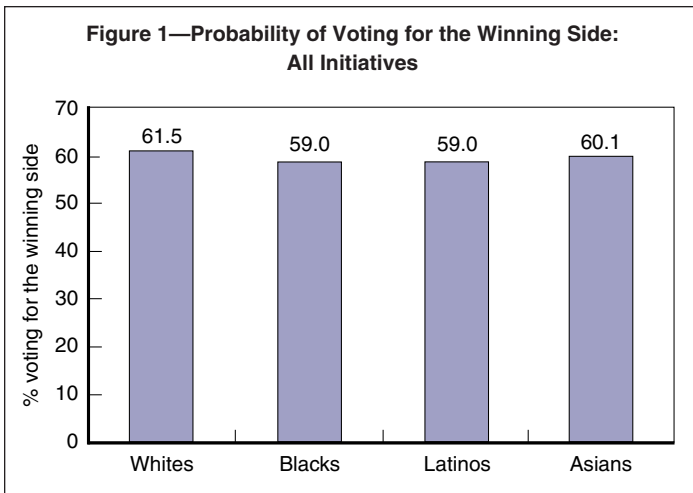
- Those that focus on nonwhite groups,
- Those that focus on issues that nonwhite voters say are important to them, and
- Those on which racial and ethnic groups show a clear preference.

Going beyond the question of winners and losers, the report also measures the degree to which the interests of white and nonwhite voters differed and the level of unity within each group. The authors used 17 *Los Angeles Times* exit polls on 45 initiatives between 1978 and 2000 and supplemented this with pre-election Field Institute polls on 131 propositions over the same period. They then compared these results to voting records at the precinct level.

Few Differences Across Groups—Unless Race or Ethnicity Is the Issue

When considering the entire array of initiatives during this period, the authors found little evidence of major bias against any group. Every racial, ethnic, and demographic group they examined wound up on the winning side of direct democracy almost as often as every other group. Blacks and Latinos voted for the winning side 59 percent of the time, whereas Asian Americans and whites were on the winning side 60 percent and 62 percent, respectively. Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans also tended to obtain their preferred outcomes on the issues they said were most important to them. Whites, blacks, and Asian Americans voted for the winning side on these issues in equal proportions (59 percent), and Latinos voted for the winning side 52 percent of the time. Finally, each nonwhite group fared reasonably well when it voted as a group. Blacks and Latinos won about 60 percent of the time when they voted cohesively, and Asian Americans and whites won nearly 65 percent of the time (Figure 1).

However, when race and ethnicity itself was an important part of an initiative, nonwhite voters fared poorly compared to whites. On minority-focused issues such as affirmative action, illegal immigration, and bilingual education, whites voted for the winning side nearly 64 percent of the time, whereas the comparable figure for Latinos was 32 percent. African Americans voted for the winning side 57 percent of the time and Asian Americans 48 percent of the time on these same initiatives (Figure 2).



If Latinos continue to be a minority of the state’s voters, the gap between white and Latino success rates on minority-focused initiatives is unlikely to disappear. Latinos voters have fared marginally worse in recent years than previously, and there is some evidence of a growing Latino-white divide

in voting patterns and greater Latino unity over time. If these trends continue or accelerate, relations between the two groups could deteriorate.

The biggest change in initiative outcomes had less to do with race and ethnicity than with how the left and right of the political spectrum have fared. Liberals and Democrats went from being regular winners in the 1980s to disproportionate losers in the 1990s. Before 1990, Democrats and Republicans voted for the winning side in similar numbers (62 percent), but since then, Democrats have voted for the winning side 2 percent less often than Republicans, and self-identified liberals have slid 6 percentage points over the last two decades.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

In general, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos have been successful when voting on initiatives. In many cases, the key to this success has been general agreement across racial and ethnic groups on the issues. Also, each group is usually divided over which initiatives to support or oppose. Both of these patterns substantially reduce any racial or ethnic bias in outcomes.

These findings do not point to clear policy prescriptions, although increasing voter participation rates among non-white groups, especially Latinos, might address many of the existing concerns. The authors note that requiring a two-thirds majority to pass initiatives would effectively give non-white voters veto power, but this change would also thwart initiatives favored by majorities within each group. As long as voters continue to agree on most issues, it will be difficult to protect nonwhite voters on the few initiatives that target them without making it more difficult for them to obtain their preferred outcomes on other initiatives.

This research brief summarizes a report by Zoltan Hajnal and Hugh Louch, Are There Winners and Losers? Race, Ethnicity, and California’s Initiative Process (2001, 100 pp., \$10.00, ISBN 1-58213-037-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, non-profit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.