

Introduction: Democracy, California Style

Eric McGhee

Public Policy Institute of California

Jack Citrin

University of California, Berkeley

California has long leaned heavily on its voters to help make law and regulate its elected officials. Many states do not even have a citizen initiative process; California not only has one but places more citizen initiatives on the ballot, in more elections, than virtually any other state. California's initiative is powerful, too: once passed, its changes cannot be undone without another initiative. California is not quite a republic in the way the nation's founding fathers imagined; it is more an ancient Athenian democracy writ large, with citizens making and breaking policy and the state's elected officials often struggling to keep up.

California's initiative shows no signs of slowing down. In the last decade, it has radically altered the state's primary system and its process of drawing representational districts; relaxed term limits on state legislators; lowered the threshold for passing a state budget and forced legislative bills to be posted three days before receiving a final vote; undone a 20-year-old rule about bilingual education; legalized marijuana and lightened the sentences of many drug defendants; and raised taxes twice.

Many of these changes were surprising because they seemed to mark a shift in the public mood. Changing the method of redistricting and lowering the threshold for the budget had been taken to the voters before, as had the legalization of marijuana. Term limits and restrictions on bilingual education had been passed by the voters themselves in the 1990s. And passing an income tax increase through the initiative process threatened the state's reputation for tax revolt. Do we need to revise the conventional wisdom about the state's electorate?

The studies in this special issue tackle these matters, which are so central to democracy in California. Two of the studies address the changes in the public mood, specifically around the budget threshold and the lifting of restrictions on bilingual education. Two others take a step back and think about the voter turnout that is so pivotal in a populist system like California's: what holds voters back, and what can we do to encourage more to cast a ballot? Finally, one study steps even further back and explores the initiative process itself, exploring how well recent changes to that process have been working. Together these studies touch upon a wide range of features of California-style democracy, taking its pulse and understanding where it might be headed next.

For more than 70 years, California had required two-thirds of state legislators to agree to essentially every annual budget. The required bipartisan coalition became increasingly difficult to piece together as the parties grew farther apart. California voters finally reduced the threshold to a simple majority in 2010 with Proposition 25. Since this change neutralized much of the lever-

age wielded by minority Republicans in the legislature, one might expect Republican voters to be strongly opposed to the change. But as J. Andrew Sinclair shows, just 43 percent of Republicans were opposed, even while 77 percent of them supported Republican Meg Whitman for governor. Sinclair finds that much of the defection from the party line on Proposition 25 can be explained by Republican voters who disliked their party's positions on the budget: they blamed the party for the budget stalemates and rejected its firmly antitax position. Attitudes about process also mattered, and Republican women were especially likely to support Whitman while voting for a simple majority for the budget. On the whole, many members of the party seemed to know what they were doing by supporting Proposition 25, and did it anyway.

Another significant policy reversal came in the November 2016 election when California voters repealed key aspects of the state's ban on bilingual education. Proposition 58, which passed by a wide margin (74 percent to 26 percent), relaxed the strictures of Proposition 227, which had passed by the voters with virtually the opposite margin, 61 percent to 39 percent. Citrin and his colleagues show that this large shift cannot be explained by the growing Latino and Asian-American shares of the California population, nor by increasing support for the Democratic Party and its policy positions. In fact, they show that the broad contours of opinion on bilingual education have hardly changed over the last 20 years. Voters still support bilingual education as a tool for learning English more than a means of maintaining cultural identity. Rather, the authors argue that Proposition 58's success more likely stemmed from the framing of the initiative. The initiative title and the campaign around it obscured the fact that it repealed Proposition 227 and highlighted the benefits of bilingual education for a globally competitive workforce. When survey respondents were told that Proposition 58 repealed much of Proposition 227, support dropped considerably, but it also went up when they were exposed to the pragmatic economic arguments offered by proponents of the measure. Campaigns matter.

Two of the studies in this issue address a more enduring question in a populist democracy: who votes and who doesn't? Voter turnout under California's new top-two primary has been disappointing. Rather than seeing the increase many had hoped for, turnout has been flat or has declined. One way to improve this situation is through better mobilization. Hughes and his colleagues examine whether mobilization messages are more effective in certain campaign contexts than in others, using a field experiment that randomly sends mobilization messages to some voters but not others. They find that, all else equal, the messages are less effective when they are swamped in races that are already competitive. At the same time, messages are *more* effective in districts that tend to be competitive year in and year out. The authors conclude that mobilization should focus on voters in competitive districts who do not happen to have competitive races in the current election cycle. Such mobilization could still help turnout for statewide offices or initiatives, even if the consequences would be limited for the quiet down-ballot contests.

Lopes and McGhee explore similar targeting questions by examining the link between trust in government and voter turnout. The conventional wisdom says that voters who do not trust government become turned off from politics and avoid voting as a result. The argument has a surface plausibility: trust is low and turnout is low. But Lopes and McGhee find if anything the relationship runs the other way: those who are *less* trusting are *more* likely to vote. The relationship is not very strong and part of it can be accounted for with factors other than trust. But the evidence never supports the conventional wisdom. Instead, voters who are trusting may become apathetic because they expect that the right decisions are being made. Mobilizing them may be a matter of convincing them that the government still needs to hear their voices, even if they believe all is well.

If the rest of these studies explore the realities of a populist democracy on the ground, the final study in this issue looks at how the rules that govern such a system affect voter engagement with the process. California recently lengthened the period of time before an initiative is officially placed on the ballot and filled much of that time with opportunities for public comment on the proposed measure. Romero and Keidan examine these public comments, both the ones entered in a new online forum and the ones made at legislative hearings mandated by the new process. They conclude that most of the online comments were emotional or negative, with very few positive or substantively constructive criticisms. Meanwhile, the legislative hearings appeared to attract small audiences that were generally dominated by organized interests, much as would have been the case before the reform. The authors spoke with a number of Sacramento insiders who believed neither forum changed many opinions, though the extra time may have allowed some behind-the-scenes negotiations among elites to come to fruition. Based on this information, the authors make several helpful suggestions for how to improve the law and make the comment period more constructive.

Together, these studies give a sense of the character of California's highly open, populist style of democracy. California has long encouraged participation by voters in all aspects of its democratic process. This has the considerable advantage of limiting policies that get too out of touch with the popular will. But it also opens the California democratic process to all the vicissitudes of voter decisions, with implications from how questions are framed and who shows up to vote. Voters by and large are practical and lack strong ideological commitments, and the studies here reinforce that. Republican voters are more willing to support a budget process change if they feel their own party is not contributing to a functional budget process. Voters generally support bilingual education, but only as an instrument toward improved economic outcomes. They are willing to vote, but contentment leads to apathy more than to enthusiasm, and messages meant to energize can have diminishing returns. Most important, the typical voter does not get delved too deeply into the world of politics, so reforms dependent on such involvement may not work as intended.

In fact, the typical voter's disengagement from political life holds enduring lessons for designing and reshaping a democracy like California's. Most citizens find life complicated enough without worrying about the political sphere as well. It makes sense that most of them leave politics for others to tend, turning their attention back to it only when absolutely necessary. Careful nurturing can potentially increase their engagement over time, as evidenced by stronger mobilization effects in places that routinely see competitive races. But their engagement will always be limited enough to make them vulnerable to the way questions are presented to them, or to the way that they are asked to engage. To make its democracy work, California must strive to make participation as easy, and the questions its voters must consider, as simple as possible. The closer the state can get to that goal, the more constructive its style of democracy will become. This is particularly important as it is clear that interest groups and ambitious politicians will continue to use expensive campaigns and legislative maneuvers to propose complicated policies through initiatives and referenda.