

# BALLOTWATCH

## Important Facts

- 16 propositions
- Historical average: 18
- Most: 48 measures in 1914

## THE “LONG” CALIFORNIA BALLOT

California’s November ballot asks voters to decide 16 ballot measures, more than any other state. Is this asking too much of voters? Will bad policy decisions be made? And how will the long ballot affect the prospects of the individual measures?

While 16 measures might seem like a lot, surprisingly it is **below the historical norm** for California. An IRI review of all general election ballots since 1912 (when the state adopted the initiative and referendum) reveals that the average number of measures on the ballot is **18**. Of the 46 general elections since 1912, 29 had 16 or more measures on the ballot, and only 17 had fewer. The record was established in 1914, when 48 measures were on the ballot.

How do voters deal with long ballots? It is sometimes claimed that when ballots get too long, voters become confused about individual measures or simply frustrated, and tend to vote no against everything. The idea is that risk averse voters prefer to stick with the status quo when they can’t evaluate the proposed alternative.

But if this happens, it does not happen very much: 55% of the 839 general election

Most Measures on the Ballot

Year	Number
1914	48
1922	30
1988	29
1926	28
1990	28

measures since 1912 have been approved—the approval rate for measures on the 10 longest ballots is only a little lower, 50%.

Are voters competent to make so many complex policy decisions at the same time? Survey research shows that many voters do not understand the details of propositions when they vote. But this doesn’t mean their decisions are flawed. Other research shows that voters can make the right choices for themselves by using endorsements from trusted friends, interest groups, etc. For example, an environmentalist can make the right decision (given his or her values) on an environmental measure by heeding the endorsements of the environmental groups like the Sierra Club. By way of comparison, it is doubtful that state legislators fully understood, let alone read, all of

the 800+ bills they sent to the governor in 2004.

The use of long ballots has been a feature of California elections for a century. During much of that time, California’s public sector was widely admired. Voters seem able to navigate through these seemingly complex ballots.

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