

## THE EFFECTS OF BALLOT INITIATIVES ON VOTER TURNOUT IN THE AMERICAN STATES

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With few exceptions, voter turnout continues to decline in the United States. Although normative theorists, journalists, and defenders of participatory democracy frequently suggest that citizen-initiated ballot measures can increase voter turnout, previous research has not supported this claim. Yet, in the past 25 years, usage of direct democracy has exploded in the United States. Using pooled time series data for the 50 states over a 26-year period (1970-1996), we find that the presence and usage of the initiative process is associated with higher voter turnout in both presidential and midterm elections. The disparity in turnout rates between initiative and noninitiative states has been increasing over time, estimated at 7% to 9% higher in midterm and 3% to 4.5% higher in presidential elections in the 1990s. Our analysis suggests that the initiative process can and does play a positive role in increasing electoral participation.

**As the number and importance** of citizen-initiated ballot measures continue to grow in the American states, scholars are increasingly turning their attention to this particular brand of plebiscitory democracy. There has been a growing use of initiatives and referenda in the United States and European countries to decide policy issues (Bowler, Donovan, & Tolbert, 1998; Butler & Ranney, 1994). In some American states, such as California, direct democracy has become a preferred mechanism of governing as the state's most important policies—taxes, spending, education, health, environment, affirmative action, immigration, welfare—are now decided via initiatives and referenda (Schrag, 1998). As we shift into an information-technology age, worldwide trends highlight the increased use of referenda and more participatory models of governing (Mendolsohn & Parkin, 2001; Peters, 1996). Since the late 1970s, usage of the initiative process in

the American states has exploded, comparable only to the Progressive era (1900-1920).

At the same time, voter turnout continues to decline in American politics. Hovering at 55% of registered voters in the 1996 presidential elections, turnout rates in the United States are among the lowest of the advanced industrialized nations. Increasing citizen participation is a primary goal of those proposing Internet voting, same-day voter registration, mail voting ballots, Motor Voter, nonpartisan primaries, and other reforms to update our electoral system. Some suggest that those states that have been leaders in using direct democracy will be the first to allow Internet voting and voter registration. An unsuccessful citizen initiative circulated for the 2000 California ballot, for example, would have required the Secretary of State to implement Internet voting and voter registration (Initiative and Referendum Institute, Washington, DC). Do electoral reforms, such as the initiative process, stimulate increased electoral participation? Do states that allow citizens to place policy questions on the ballot for a popular vote have higher voter turnout? This research examines whether the increased use of direct democracy in the past three decades has had an effect on turnout rates for the period 1970-1996 across the 50 states.

The merits and defects of the initiative process is the subject of a hotly contested debate in the scholarly and popular literature. Proponents of direct democracy argue that allowing citizens to vote directly on policy questions should increase citizen participation, citizen efficacy, and trust in government, while opponents argue that the process has little impact. The effects of direct democracy on turnout rates is one of the most frequently cited arguments made by proponents of participatory models (Peters, 1996). Opponents of the initiative process, and especially the policies adopted by voter initiatives such as term limits and tax limitations, argue that it threatens to weaken state legislatures (Rosenthal, 1997), tyrannize minority groups (Bell, 1978; Gamble, 1997; Schrag, 1998), and even supplant representative democracy (Broder, 2000; Schrag, 1998). While there has been an extended debate in the popular and scholarly literature about ballot initiatives and turnout, there is little solid empirical evidence to support either side. This research is an attempt to clarify this debate. The findings presented here are applicable to policy makers (state lawmakers), the

popular press, and scholars of turnout and direct democracy in the American states.

#### THE CITIZEN INITIATIVE PROCESS AND VOTER TURNOUT

In the two dozen states that currently permit the process, initiative politics are shaping not only policy outcomes, but also the nature of the democratic process itself. Nineteen states adopted the initiative process during the Progressive era. The reforms were passed in response to widespread corruption and the perceived strong influence over state politics by the powerful railroads. The initiative process allows citizens to draft new state laws or amend the state constitution by collecting a specified number of voter signatures (Cronin, 1989; Gerber, 1999; Magleby, 1984).<sup>1</sup> If the threshold of signatures is collected, an initiative can qualify for a state primary or general election ballot. If the proposal is adopted by a majority of voters, it amends the state's constitution or statutory law. In the referenda (popular or legislative), in contrast, voters can respond only to policy formulated by the legislature. The initiative has been a common tool for state government reform, largely due to its agenda-setting power. Because groups outside of the legislature can propose new legislation, the subject matter of citizen initiatives tends to be more controversial than policy referred by state legislatures. Citizen initiatives are thus the focus of this research.

The initiative, both directly and indirectly, has changed the political landscape of nearly half the states. In terms of public policy, citizens have initiated state statutes and constitutional amendments altering affirmative action, reproductive rights, gay rights, bilingual education, public health, immigration, environmental protection, taxes, spending, education, welfare policy, and a host of other substantive issues (Bowler & Donovan, 1998; Bowler et al., 1998; Broder, 2000; Cronin, 1989; Gamble, 1997; Gerber, 1996, 1999; Lascher, Hagen, & Rochlin, 1996; Magleby, 1984; Schrag, 1998). Proponents have also used the citizen initiative to directly enact procedural reforms. Citizens have passed initiatives capping campaign finance contributions, providing for the public financing of candidates, limiting the terms of elected officials, opening "closed" primaries, enacting mail voting,

and restricting legislatures' ability to tax and spend (Rosenthal, 1997; Smith, 1998; Tolbert, 1998). Indirectly, the initiative process has altered the democratic process by compelling candidates and their state and national parties to debate divisive issues during political campaigns (Chavez, 1998), and it has elevated the stature of political consultants in state elections due to the large amounts of money spent on some measures (Magleby & Patterson, 1998).

One of the more important indirect procedural consequences of direct democracy is the effect that ballot initiatives may have on participation levels of citizens—specifically voter turnout. Participation is one of the dominant political themes of the 1990s as advocates search for more political, democratic, and collective mechanisms for sending signals to government (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Peters, 1996). Normative theorists in particular have long argued that direct forms of democracy can motivate participation by energizing citizens with a sense of civic duty and political efficacy (Morrell, 1999; Pateman, 1970). Calling for more “discursive democracy” (Dryzek, 1990), “strong democracy” (Barber, 1984), “teledemocracy” (Toffler & Toffler, 1995), and “deliberation” (Fishkin, 1993), scholars have offered a variety of participatory models of decision making.

The general prescription for making government function better is to foster greater individual and collective participation within segments of government organizations and structure institutions to include mass citizen participation (Peters, 1996). In its simplest form, participatory government is plebescitarian, with the public being asked to decide public issues by a direct vote. These participatory models imply that the system of representative democracy is far from perfect in transmitting the wishes of the public into policy, and that direct democracy procedures can improve the situation, even in a complex modern society (Barber, 1984, pp. 235-236; Dryzek, 1990). While the degree to which government policy actually reflects citizens' desires is a matter of debate, there is evidence suggesting that policy more closely matches mass preferences in American states with direct democracy (Gerber, 1996; Gerber & Hug, 2001; Matsusaka, 1995; but see Comobrecco, 1998; Lascher et al., 1996).

There is also a common perception among journalists and supporters of direct democracy that ballot initiatives often stimulate voter

interest, and in turn, increase turnout on election day. Consumer activist Ralph Nader has claimed that direct democracy could mobilize “people who ordinarily would not be part of the political process” (quoted in Magleby, 1984, p. 77). In 1978, *The New York Times* editorialized, “Direct democracy offers another benefit: It is a powerful stimulus to political participation” (“Making Democracy More Interesting,” 1978), while more recently, an article in *Congress Daily*, an outlet of the *National Journal*, claimed, “High-profile initiatives on statewide ballots could dramatically affect voter turnout in some House and Senate races this fall [1998], and potentially influence who wins” (“Turnout Could Hinge on Initiatives,” 1998). Advocates of direct democracy refer to this apparent increase in voter turnout in initiative states as the “spillover effect” (Schmidt, 1989, p. 27).

Despite the popular view, normative literature and claims made by proponents of direct democracy, previous scholarship based on empirical data suggests that voter turnout does not increase appreciably when initiatives are placed on the ballot (Cronin, 1989, pp. 227-228; Everson, 1981; Magleby, 1984, pp. 96-98). Two landmark studies in particular downplay the positive effects direct democracy may have on voter turnout. Using independent sample *t* tests and cross-sectional 50-state data to compare voter turnout in initiative and noninitiative states between 1960 and 1978, Everson (1981) finds that in presidential and midterm elections turnout is slightly higher in initiative than noninitiative states. However, after removing Southern states from the equation, which for cultural and historical reasons have had lower turnout, he finds that noninitiative states actually have higher turnout during presidential elections than initiative states, with turnout during midterm elections staying roughly the same. Everson’s analysis did not control usage of the initiative process, concurrent statewide races for political office (i.e., governor, U.S. Senate), election years, registration requirements or other socioeconomic variations among the states. Building on the findings of Everson, Magleby (1984, pp. 96-98) suggests that on average, northern states with the initiative have no greater voter turnout than northern states without the initiative between 1960 and 1980. With respect to one aberrant year, 1978, when voter turnout was indeed 3% higher in initiative states than noninitiative states, Magleby (1984) speculates that voters in initia-

tives states may have been “responding to the stimulus of candidate contests and not initiatives” (p. 98), for on the whole, “over the last twenty years, turnout generally has been the same whether or not states had the initiative process” (p. 98).

Previous research, including the influential study by Everson (1981), did not use statistical methods appropriate for pooled time series data, and did not control for other factors that may shape variation in turnout rates across the states. Some initiative states, such as California, have a large number of policies on the ballot every election, while other states, such as Wyoming have used the process only rarely. Previous research on voter turnout measured only the presence of the initiative process in a state, not usage of the process over time (Tolbert, Lowenstein, & Donovan, 1998). Furthermore, scholars have not analyzed turnout rates in the 1990s, a period of the greatest activity in direct democracy in the past century.

In the realm of initiative politics, much has changed since the early 1980s, when Everson conducted his study. Not only has the amount of spending on ballot propositions increased exponentially over the past two decades, usage of the process has exploded over the past two decades, comparable only to the first two decades of the twentieth century. In the 1990s, more than 300 statewide initiatives qualified for the ballot, an average of 60 per general election nationwide. The number of statewide initiatives on the ballot across the nation during the 1990s surpassed all other decades, even the previous high set during the 1910s (Cronin, 1989; Magleby, 1994; Price, 1975; Schmidt, 1989). A primary focus of this analysis is whether the increased usage of initiative process in the last two decades has translated into higher turnout rates.

## **DIRECT DEMOCRACY AND VOTER TURNOUT**

### **MEASURING VOTER TURNOUT**

Reconsidering the indirect impact of the initiative on voter turnout in the states, this study examines voter turnout over the period 1970-1996 using pooled cross-sectional time series data for the 50 states controlling for variation between states and over time. The

dependent variable in the analysis is voter age turnout (VAT) every 2 years, which is available from the *Statistical Abstracts of the United States* (U.S. Census Bureau). The data are a measure of the votes cast for president or for U.S. Representative in midterm years, divided by the population older than age 18.

#### MEASURING THE CITIZEN INITIATIVE PROCESS

Consistent with the normative theorists, states with the initiative process and with more frequent usage of the process are hypothesized to have higher turnout rates over time. A dummy variable is used to measure the presence of the initiative process with the twenty-four initiative states coded 1 and all others coded 0.<sup>2</sup> With a few exceptions, most states with the initiative process have at least one initiative or referendum on the ballot each election.<sup>3</sup> The dummy variable for the initiative process is also used as a proxy for a participatory state political culture that has developed over the past century (Elazar, 1984). In initiative states, citizens are accustomed to frequently voting on ballot propositions placed on the ballot by interest groups or the state legislature (Tolbert, 1998). This variable does not measure variations in state usage of the initiative process over time.

We anticipate states with more initiatives on the ballot (and thus more frequent usage of direct democracy) will also have higher voter turnout. We include a measure of the actual number of initiatives appearing on the statewide ballot every 2 years from 1970 to 1996 to measure usage of the process. The data are from the Initiative and Referendum Institute (Washington, DC) (1998), which supplies the most accurate source of information available on direct democracy in the states. There is only a moderate correlation between the presence of the initiative process and the number of initiatives on the ballot in any given year.

Increased voter turnout in initiative states is hypothesized to be the most pronounced in midterm elections when ballot initiatives do not compete with presidential candidates for media attention. Thus, even if only one or two initiatives qualify for the ballot in midterm elections, this may be sufficient to stimulate increased citizen participation, especially if they are controversial policy questions. When ballot initiatives must compete with presidential candidates for media cover-

age, they may require a larger number of initiatives to increase turnout rates. That is, the threshold for the initiative process to have an impact on turnout rates may be higher in presidential than in midterm elections.

Another way of conceptualizing variation between midterm and presidential elections is in terms of voter information. Midterm elections are low information elections with very few sources of mobilization, thus making the electorate more sensitive to those sources of mobilization that do exist, such as the initiative process. Presidential elections, however, are high information elections in which there are multiple sources of mobilization. As a result, the simple presence of the initiative is unlikely to mobilize more voters, but the presence of several items on the ballot may be enough to bring out a few extra votes. We thus suggest that the presence and usage of the initiative process may have a different substantive impact in midterm versus presidential elections.

Research by Smith (2001), using different explanatory variables, provides a useful comparison study. Arguing that not all initiatives are the same, Smith measures the "salience" of initiatives and popular referenda on the ballot by the percentage of front-page newspaper coverage devoted to ballot issues on the day following an election. Smith examines the impact of ballot measures on voter turnout between 1972 and 1996. He finds that states with "salient" initiatives and popular referenda on the ballot do tend to have higher turnout in midterm elections than noninitiative states, but not in presidential years. Without a presidential race on the ballot, voter, and media attention focuses instead on state level issues and candidate contests. Ballot initiatives that spark interest from a wide cross-section of the public appear to increase voter turnout in elections. Smith's measure raises some questions of content validity.<sup>4</sup> A more direct and simple measure of saliency is the actual number of initiatives on the ballot each election, as used here.

#### **ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS FOR VARIATIONS IN TURNOUT RATES OVER TIME**

Difficulties collecting data for all states over a lengthy time period limit the number of variables that can be controlled. Following



Everson (1981), we control for Southern states. Southern states are coded 1 and 0 if otherwise. Southern states have traditionally had considerably lower turnout rates as a legacy of Jim Crow laws (poll taxes, literacy tests, etc.) and one-party dominance. We also include a covariate for the presence of statewide races—namely gubernatorial and U.S. Senate elections. A dummy variable for gubernatorial races is coded 1 if the state had a gubernatorial race and 0 if otherwise. The same coding scheme is used for U.S. Senate races. Previous research has shown voter registration requirements have an important effect on statewide turnout—more stringent registration laws leads to lower voter turnout (Erikson, 1981; Rosenstone & Wolfinger, 1978). We measure registration requirements by the number of days before the election one can register to vote (closing data) in each state over time. States with election day registration are coded 0, for example, and states requiring registration a month before the election are coded 30. Raw data are from the biannual *Book of the States* for the years 1970 to 1998.

At the individual level, differential voter turnout rates by socioeconomic status in American politics have long been recognized by scholars and policy makers alike: individuals with higher income, education, and occupational status are considerably more likely to vote (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). We include variables controlling for the percentage of the population with a high school degree or higher in each state over time (U.S. Census, 1970-1990). States with higher income inequality are also likely to have lower turnout rates. Yearly income inequality is measured by a Gini index for each state from the period 1970-1996 (Langer, 1999).

In addition, many scholars have found that race plays a central, if not defining role, in both national and subnational politics in the United States (Hero 1998; Key, 1949). Using state level cross-sectional data, Hill and Leighley (1999) demonstrate that racial diversity is strongly associated with lower levels of voter turnout, weaker mobilizing institutions, and more restrictive voter registration requirements over the past half century. State minority diversity, or the proportion of the population that is minority, is measured with an index developed by Hero and Tolbert (1996) and Hero (1998) using 1980

and 1990 census data on the percentage of the Latino, Black, White, and Asian populations in each state.<sup>5</sup>

#### MODELING THE DATA

Previous research on voter turnout suggests it is necessary to analyze presidential and midterm elections separately (Smith, 1999; Jackson, 1997) given the substantially higher turnout in presidential elections across states. Chow tests indicate the constant terms for the models for presidential and midterm elections were statistically different, confirming the need to run separate regression analyses for midterm and presidential election years.<sup>6</sup> In his preliminary study, Smith (1999) suggests that the presence of salient initiatives on the ballot may be particularly important in midterm elections.

We are interested in accounting for variation in turnout rates over time to see if the increased use of direct democracy has had a positive effect on turnout, and across states to see if states that use the initiative process have higher levels of voter turnout.<sup>7</sup> Beck and Katz (1995) have made a strong argument against using the random effects model for pooled data and instead recommend use of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with panel corrected standard errors (PCSE).<sup>8</sup> Beck and Katz show that when the number of time periods is small relative to the number of panels ( $T < N$ ), the coverage probabilities based on the OLS point estimates with panel-corrected standard errors are closer to nominal levels than the coverage probabilities of the general least squares (GLS) estimators with associated model-based GLS standard errors. Our models of midterm and presidential elections have seven time periods ( $T$ ) and seven panels ( $N$ ), where  $T = N$ . The panels in our study are election years (1970-1996) with the 50 states as cross-sectional observations. Using PCSE allows us to control for variation across cross-sectional units, which in this case are states. Through the inclusion of dummy variables for election years, we are also able to control for variation over time. The combination of accounting for between-state variation and dummy variables for years provides a two-way control model.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Table 1 displays the impact of the presence and usage of the initiative process on voter turnout in presidential elections from 1972-1996 using an OLS regression model with panel corrected standard errors. Consistent with previous findings, states with the initiative process do not have higher turnout rates on average during this period (Smith, 1999). However, consistent with our hypothesis, *voter turnout rates are higher in presidential elections in states with more initiatives on the ballot, even after controlling for state specific variations, other candidate races, registration requirements, idiosyncratic differences in specific elections, state racial/ethnic composition, and socioeconomic conditions.* The data indicate states with frequent usage of the initiative process have higher turnout rates in presidential elections than states with low or no usage of the process. This suggests that in order for the process to stimulate turnout in high information presidential elections, a number of initiatives must appear on the ballot. This finding suggests that salient issue contests can encourage citizens to turn out and vote in presidential elections, lending support to participatory models of political organization (Peters, 1996).

Scholars of direct democracy suggest too many initiatives on the ballot can lead to “ballot-fatigue” (Magleby, 1984) decreasing voter turnout. To test this hypothesis, we examine a nonlinear transformation of the number of initiatives variable by adding a covariate (number of initiatives squared) to estimate a quadratic model. The quadratic model in the last column of Table 1 suggests there is little evidence of decreasing returns from having too many initiatives on the ballot in presidential elections.

Our findings contradict previous research reporting that states with the initiative process do not have higher turnout rates than noninitiative states (Everson, 1981; Magleby, 1984) and research finding higher turnout rates in midterm elections only (Smith, 1999). While Smith (1999) finds higher turnout rates in midterm elections in states with “salient initiatives” on the ballot, he does not detect higher turnout rates in presidential elections as we have shown here.

**TABLE 1**  
**Impact of Direct Democracy on Voter Turnout in 1972 to 1996 Presidential Elections: 50 State Data**

<i>Presidential Election: Variable</i>	<i>Presence of the Initiative Process</i>				<i>Presence and Usage of Initiative Process</i>				<i>Quadratic Model of Initiative Use</i>			
	$\beta$	PCSE	p	Tolerance	$\beta$	PCSE	p	Tolerance	$\beta$	PCSE	p	Tolerance
State initiative process <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>	-.28	.50	.58	.74	-.96	.56	.09	.59				
Number of initiatives on ballot <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>					.32	.12	.01	.68	.28	.24	.24	.18
Number of initiatives on ballot squared <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>									-.004	.02	.84	.19
Senate election <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>	.39	.46	.39	.99	.44	.46	.33	.99	.43	.46	.34	.99
Southern state <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>	-5.29	.82	.00	.38	-5.34	.81	.00	.38	-5.38	.82	.00	.38
Gubernatorial election <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>	.90	.55	.11	.78	.81	.54	.14	.77	.81	.55	.15	.77
Percentage high school graduates <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>	.22	.06	.03	.10	.20	.06	.00	.10	.17	.06	.00	.10
Index of minority diversity <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>	-23.70	1.83	.00	.52	-24.45	1.83	.00	.50	-23.67	1.80	.00	.53
Income inequality (Gini coefficients) <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>	65.65	15.24	.00	.22	66.63	15.09	.00	.22	60.16	14.83	.00	.23
Registration requirements <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>	-.14	.02	.00	.73	-.14	.02	.00	.72	-.15	.02	.00	.72
Constant	31.36	8.55	.00		32.06	7.49			35.69	7.35	.00	
Number of groups (i)	50				50				50			
Wald chi-square	847.03		.00		871.90	.00	861.86				.00	
Log-likelihood	-985.52				-981.92				-983.37			
N	350				350				350			

NOTE: Ordinary least squares (OLS) model with time series cross-sectional data for the 50 states. Unstandardized regression coefficients with panel corrected standard errors (PCSE). Probabilities based on two-tailed test. Subscript *i* contains the unit to which the observations belong, in this case state id, and controls for variation in turnout rates between states. White *t* represents time or the year the observation was measured. The tolerance statistic is the proportion of variability of that variable that is not explained by its linear relationship with the other independent variables in the model. Since tolerance is a proportion, its value ranges from 0 to 1. A value close to 1 indicates that an independent variable has little of its variability explained by the other independent variables. A value close to 0 indicates a collinear relationship. When the variable for percentage of high school graduates was omitted from the model (low tolerance statistic), the substantive interpretation of the model was unchanged. Intercepts for dummy variables for elections every 4 years, 1976-1996, were not reported due to space constraints, with 1972 as the base year. There is minimal collinearity between the dummy variable for the initiative process and the number of initiatives on the ballot ( $r = .51$ ).

In contrast to previous research, our model distinguishes between states that have the initiative process and rarely use it (e.g., Illinois, Mississippi, Wyoming) and states that frequently use the process (e.g., California, Colorado, Oregon). The models confirm our hypothesis that states with more frequent usage of the initiative process have higher voter turnout in presidential elections over the past 26 years.

Consistent with previous research, we find that Southern states on average tend to have lower turnout than non-Southern states, after controlling for other factors and that states with more stringent registration requirements have lower voter turnout. Confirming research by Hill and Leighley (1999), our time series model shows that states with higher racial diversity have considerably lower voter turnout rates in presidential elections over the 26-year period.

#### MIDTERM ELECTIONS

The findings differ slightly from presidential to midterm elections (Jackson, 1997; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Confirming previous research (Smith, 1999), during midterm elections (1970-1994) the dummy variable for the presence of the initiative process is positive and has a statistically significant impact on voter turnout (see Table 2). States with the initiative process, but not necessarily more frequent usage of the process, have higher turnout rates in midterm elections. As in presidential elections, usage of the process, measured by the number of initiatives on the ballot is *also* positively related to higher turnout rates. Why is the initiative dummy variable significant in midterm elections, but not presidential elections?

As suggested earlier, midterm elections are generally low information elections, with few sources of mobilization. Thus the lower threshold of only one or two propositions (initiatives or legislative referenda) on the ballot per election cycle (measured by the dummy variable) appears to be sufficient to stimulate turnout in midterm elections, when media coverage of candidate races is lower. Many ballot initiatives, however, may transform low information midterm elections to high information elections (Bowler & Donovan, 1998), stimulating turnout. Ballot propositions may add information to already high information presidential elections, also increasing turnout.

**TABLE 2**  
**Impact of Direct Democracy on Voter Turnout in 1970-1994 Midterm Elections: 50 State Data**

<i>Midterm Elections: Variable</i>	<i>Presence of the Initiative Process</i>				<i>Presence and Usage of Initiative Process</i>				<i>Quadratic Model of Initiative Use</i>			
	$\beta$	PCSE	p	Tolerance	$\beta$	PCSE	p	Tolerance	$\beta$	PCSE	p	Tolerance
State initiative process <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>	2.32	.76	.00	.74	1.62	.82	.05	.61				
Number of initiatives on ballot <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>					.40	.19	.04	.72	1.22	.37	.00	.19
Number of initiatives on ballot squared <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>									-.07	.03	.04	.20
Senate election <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>	1.32	.70	.06	.99	1.44	.70	.04	.98	1.37	.69	.05	.98
Southern state <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>	-8.02	1.26	.00	.36	-7.94	1.26	.00	.36	-7.83	1.25	.00	.36
Gubernatorial election <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>	.62	.77	.42	.88	.59	.76	.44	.88	.66	.76	.39	.88
Percentage high school graduates <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>	.18	.09	.04	.08	.17	.09	.05	.08	.20	.08	.01	.09
Index of minority diversity <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>	-20.05	2.66	.00	.55	-20.60	2.67	.00	.54	-21.14	2.62	.00	.56
Income inequality	-17.74	.42	-17.75	.42	13.47	.53						
Gini coefficients <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>	22.13	.18	22.00	.18	21.58	.19						
Registration requirements <sub><i>i,t</i></sub>	-.09	.03	.01	.74	-.09	.03	.01	.74	-.09	.03	.01	.74
Constant	48.31	10.42	.00	48.89	10.36	.00	46.34	10.06	.00			
Number of groups (i)	50				50				50			
Wald chi-square	593.00		.00		604.58		.00		605.32		.00	
Log-likelihood	-1124.01				-1121.88				-1121.75			
N	349				349				350			

NOTE: Ordinary least squares (OLS) model with time series cross-sectional data for the 50 states. Unstandardized regression coefficients with panel corrected standard errors (PCSE) in parentheses. Probabilities based on two-tailed test. Subscript *i* contains the unit to which the observations belong, in this case state number, and controls for variation in turnout rates between states. White subscript *t* represents time or the year observation was measured. Intercepts for dummy variables for elections every 4 years, 1974 to 1994, were not reported due to space constraints, with 1970 as the base year. There is minimal collinearity between the dummy variable for the initiative process and the number of initiatives on the ballot ( $r = .46$ ).

But can too much of a good thing—voting on ballot measures—decrease turnout? In contrast to the model for presidential elections, the “ballot fatigue” hypothesis is suggested for midterm elections. In the quadratic model reported in the last column of Table 2, the coefficient for the squared number of initiatives on the ballot is inversely related to voter turnout. While more ballot initiatives lead to higher turnout, too many policy questions may have a negative effect of decreasing turnout. This suggests that claims made by proponents of a pure (e.g., electronic) direct democracy in America—where voters would continually be asked to make public policy decisions—may actually be detrimental for widespread democratic participation (Barber, 1984; Budge, 1996; Toffler & Toffler, 1995).

#### COMPARING INITIATIVE TO NONINITIATIVE STATES

The previous analysis suggests there is a significant difference in turnout levels in initiative and noninitiative states in presidential and midterm elections. Since 1978, the year that California’s tax limitation Proposition 13 sparked a renewed interest in direct democracy in the states, roughly a 5% gap in voter turnout is evident between initiative and noninitiative states in midterm and presidential elections not controlling for other factors (see Figure 1). Figure 2 shows on average a 10% gap in voter turnout between initiative and noninitiative states in midterm elections, while Figure 3 shows a somewhat smaller 5% gap in turnout rates in presidential elections. While a rough indicator, this is a non-trivial difference in voter turnout rates between states with and without the citizen initiative process.

We also examine the impact of the number of initiatives on voter turnout in only those states with the initiative process (analysis not shown due to space constraints). Controlling for other factors, initiative states with more initiatives on the ballot do indeed have higher turnout in both midterm and presidential elections over time, than states that use the process only rarely. The size of the unstandardized coefficient is roughly the same for midterm and presidential elections. This is further confirmation of the positive impact of the initiative process on electoral participation rates in the states. In quadratic models, the coefficient for the number of initiatives squared was nearly zero

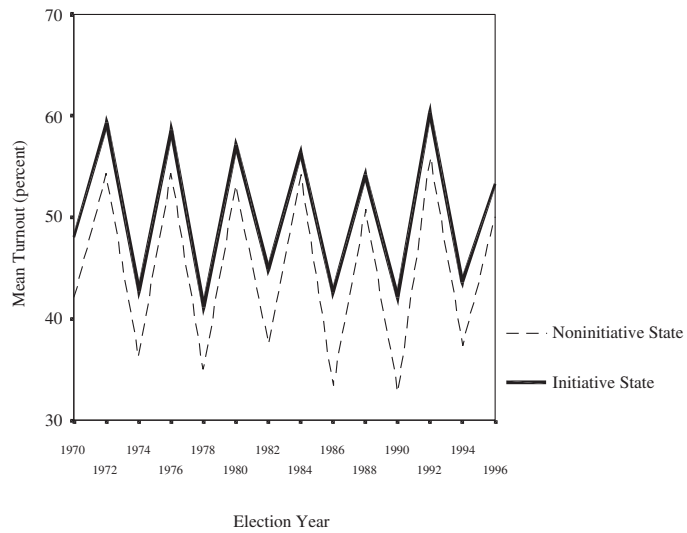


Figure 1: Voter Turnout in Initiative Versus Noninitiative States

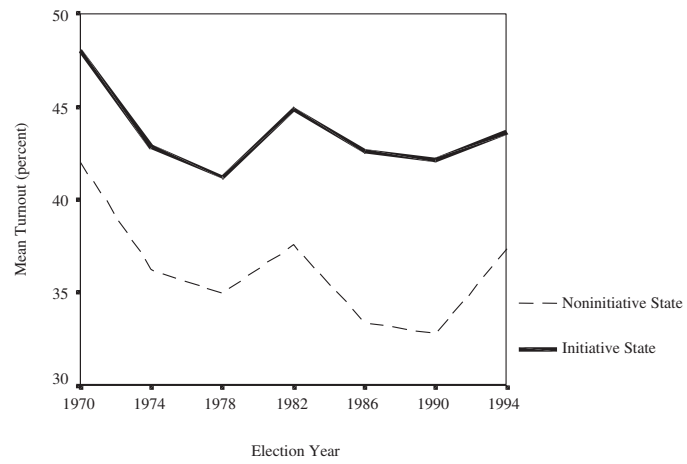
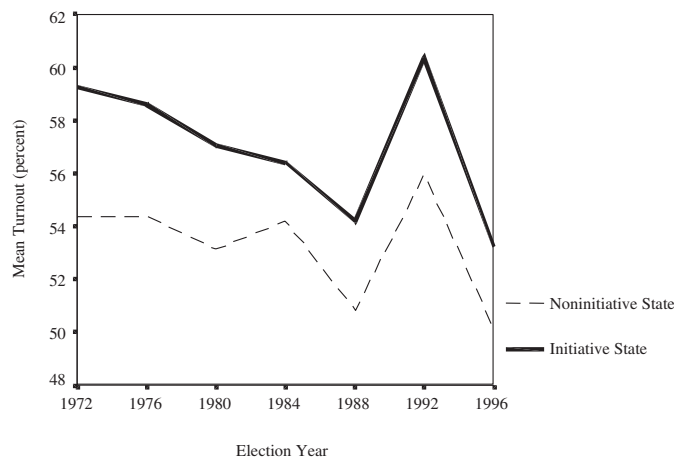


Figure 2: Voter Turnout in Midterm Elections: Initiative Versus Noninitiative States

and not statistically significant, providing little evidence of decreasing returns with more ballot propositions.





**Figure 3: Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections: Initiative Versus Noninitiative States**

Table 3 presents the predicted probability of voter turnout based on the complete 50 state models reported in Tables 1 and 2 (Model 2) by varying the presence and number of initiatives on the ballot for the 1994 midterm election and 1996 presidential election. Our baseline Model 1 is voter turnout in noninitiative states (variables for presence and number of initiatives on the ballot set to 0), estimated at 41% in the midterm election (1994) and 52% in the presidential election (1996). The estimates of turnout in each election with varying numbers of ballot initiatives are also based on the 50 state data. If a state has the initiative process, but no citizen initiatives on the ballot, voter turnout is estimated at 1.5% higher in 1994, but 1% lower in 1996 than the baseline model. If a state has two initiatives on the ballot in each election, voter turnout is estimated at 2.5% higher in the midterm election and roughly the same as the baseline model (noninitiative states) in presidential elections. If a state has four initiatives on the ballot in the 1994 and 1996 elections, turnout is estimated at more than 3% higher on average in midterm elections and .35% higher in presidential elections.

In presidential elections, the presence of the initiative process does not independently effect turnout rates. Each additional initiative on the ballot corresponds to an increase in turnout of approximately one

**TABLE 3**  
**Predicted Probability of Voter Turnout**

<i>Number of Initiatives on Election Ballot</i>	<i>Midterm Election (1994)</i>	<i>Presidential Election (1996)</i>
Baseline 1: Noninitiative states <sup>a</sup>	41.13	52.05
Baseline 2: Noninitiative states <sup>b</sup>	35.72	48.25
0	42.75	51.08
1	43.15	51.41
2	43.55	51.74
3	43.95	52.07
4	44.34	52.40
5	44.74	52.72

NOTE: Estimated probabilities based on coefficients reported in Table 1 and 2. For both presidential and midterm elections it is assumed that there is a senate and gubernatorial race on the ballot, and that it is a non-Southern state. For presidential and midterm elections, the following variables were set at their mean: high school graduation rate, minority diversity, Gini coefficient, and voter registration.

a. Estimated probability based on coefficients reported in Tables 1 and 2 (column 2) using 50 state data.

b. Estimated probability based on model with only 26 noninitiative states and identical set of predictor variables as in Tables 1 and 2.

third of a percentage, after controlling for other factors. There is no evidence of ballot fatigue from too many initiatives on the ballot in presidential elections. In midterm elections, the presence of the initiative process appears to raise turnout rates by 1.5% more than noninitiative states, while each additional initiative on the ballot corresponds to an increase in turnout of almost one half of a percentage (.40%), after controlling for other factors. While this finding is promising, in midterm elections a very high number of initiatives is associated with a decrease in turnout rates, cautioning against excessive use of the process.

For comparison purposes we present a second baseline model based on a sample of only the 26 noninitiative states over time and an identical set of predictor variables used in Tables 1 and 2. It is possible that estimated turnout for noninitiative states is inflated in baseline Model 1 given the 50-state sample. The disparity in turnout between initiative and noninitiative states using baseline Model 1 is lower than what would be expected given the graphs reported in Figures 1-3. A Chow test indicates that mean turnout for initiative and noninitiative

states are different and should be analyzed separately. Baseline Model 2 reports a more reliable estimate of voter turnout in noninitiative states based on a model of only the 26 noninitiative states. These estimates suggest voter turnout in the 1994 midterm election in initiative states was between 7% to 9% higher than in noninitiative states, while turnout in the 1996 presidential election in initiative states was between 3% to 4.5% higher than in noninitiative states, after controlling for other factors. Again, each additional initiative on the ballot raises turnout by one third of a percentage in presidential elections and almost one half a percentage in midterm elections.

Although earlier studies (Everson, 1981; Magleby, 1984) did not detect a relationship between direct democracy and electoral participation, higher voter turnout in initiative states in presidential and midterm elections should not come as a surprise. Ballot initiatives dominate media headlines, shape candidate elections, and even national party politics. Some of the most salient and emotional policy questions—from taxes, gay rights, immigration, the environment, and affirmative action—are decided by voters in initiative contests. In some states, the salience of ballot initiatives among voters has even eclipsed that of candidates running for office (Chavez, 1998; Smith, 1998).

## CONCLUSION

The empirical evidence presented here suggests states with frequent usage of citizen initiatives have higher voter turnout over a 26-year period than noninitiative states in both presidential elections and midterm elections, after controlling for alternative explanations for variation in turnout rates across the 50 states. The research suggests in order for ballot initiatives to stimulate turnout in presidential elections, the higher threshold of frequent usage of the process is required, while in midterm elections, the lower threshold of even one initiative ballot is sufficient. This suggests that both the presence and usage of the initiative process are related to higher citizen participation rates over time. This is an important finding, as the evidence contradicts previous research by Everson (1981) and Magleby (1984), both of whom found the initiative process to have a negligible impact on voter turnout. Our analysis suggests instead that the initiative pro-

cess can and does play a positive role in increasing electoral participation.

Ballot propositions may increase voter turnout by transforming low information midterm elections into high information elections, and adding additional information to already high information presidential elections. In high information elections, such as presidential elections, a higher threshold appears to be operating, in which a larger number of ballot propositions are necessary to stimulate extra votes, relative to low information elections when initiatives do not compete with presidential candidates for media coverage. Future research should explore in more detail the relationship between information, ballot propositions, and voter turnout.

Previous research showing a relationship between the initiative process and voter turnout, reports a relationship only during midterm elections (Smith, 2001). The research presented here, in contrast, suggests that ballot initiatives are systematically associated with higher turnout rates in both midterm and presidential elections. The disparity in voter turnout rates among initiative and noninitiative states has increased during the 1990s, as more propositions have qualified for state election ballots than at any other period in the century. Depending on the baseline model employed and number of initiatives on the ballot, estimates of voter turnout between initiative and noninitiative states vary. Our most reliable model estimates voter turnout in the 1994 midterm election in initiative states at 7% to 9% higher than in noninitiative states, while turnout in the 1996 presidential election in initiative states at 3% to 4.5% higher than in noninitiative states, after controlling for other factors. As initiative elections gain in their importance, they may play a growing role in presidential and midterm elections. As we have witnessed in California and several other states during the past decade, ballot measure proponents and opponents likely will continue to fuse their campaigns with the presidential, U.S. Senate, and gubernatorial candidates, and vice versa. In the future, the initiative process and more participatory modes of governance, including mail or Internet voting, as well as a national referendum, may serve to increase voter participation in both presidential and midterm election years.

## NOTES

1. In the indirect initiative, a group drafts and qualifies a proposition, then submits it to the legislature for consideration. If the legislature passes the measure, then it becomes law. Otherwise, the policy is placed on the ballot and the voters decide whether it passes or fails.

2. Mississippi adopted the citizen initiative process in 1992. The state is coded 0 (noninitiative state) for the years 1970 to 1990 and 1 (initiative state) for the years 1992 to 1996.

3. See the Web site for the Initiative and Referendum Institute, Washington, DC, for a listing of citizen initiatives and legislative referenda appearing on state election ballots over time ([www.ballotwatch.org](http://www.ballotwatch.org)).

4. Most notably, is the front page news coverage measuring what it is intended to measure (i.e., the saliency of initiative contests), or is it measuring the opinions of newspaper editors who decide what issues get front-page billing?

5. The index is a measure of a state's racial/ethnic population. The index was computed with the following formula:

$$\text{Minority diversity} = 1 - [(\text{proportion Latino})^2 + (\text{proportion Black})^2 + (\text{proportion White})^2 + (\text{proportion Asian})^2]$$

6. A Chow test based on ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models indicate that models for presidential and midterm elections should be estimated separately:  $F(15, 669)$ ,  $H_0 = 2.87$   $F = 3.30$ ,  $p = .01$  (reject null).

7. This research faces a common ecological inference problem that is probably familiar to most readers—using geographically aggregated data at the state level to make inferences about individual level behavior. While our primary interest is in understanding general voting patterns across states, due to this condition, there is the potential for misleading inferences about individual level voting decisions. Consistent with our findings, previous research using survey data and controlling for whether the respondent was from an initiative or noninitiative state, suggests that voter turnout is higher in initiative states in midterm elections (Schechter, 2000).

8. Similar substantive findings were found when using a random effects general least squares (GLS) model and feasible general least squares (FGLS) model. Model specifications are available from the authors. The random effects model assumes that variation in the individual specific constant terms are randomly distributed across cross-sectional units (Greene, 1997, p. 623).

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