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Showing Initiative (the Door)

By: [Nicholas Kusnetz](#) | January 26, 2010 | 05:00 AM (PDT) | [Print](#)

In states where ballot initiatives are common, recent studies suggest they foster a low opinion of government leadership.

At the beginning of the 20th century, American progressives pushed the idea of [ballot initiatives](#) as a cure for some of the ills of representative government. In a political system still run by patronage, proponents argued that direct democracy would hold elected officials accountable to the public and foster a more informed and active populace.

Over the years, political scientists largely supported these assertions, crediting ballot initiatives and referenda for generating higher turnout and better-educated voters. Nearly half the states in the nation allow citizens to place initiatives on the ballot, and direct democracy has become a central part of governance in many of these states, most famously California. And practically everywhere it's practiced, voters like having their [say](#).

But the process may have unwittingly created a more distrusting public as well.

A recent study out of the [State University of New York at Buffalo](#) found that people living in states with frequent, robust ballot initiatives are less likely to trust their government than those without direct democracy. It seems that by circumventing the legislature on major issues such as budget policy and gay marriage, voters aren't giving their representatives a chance to earn their trust, said [Joshua Dyck](#), who teaches political science at SUNY Buffalo and wrote the study published in July's [American Politics Research](#).

"We're constantly being reminded in some way, shape or form that government isn't considering these questions or maybe isn't doing something right," he said. It sends a signal to voters: "Why do we do this? Because we have a bunch of corrupt legislators."

The study looked at a couple of national polls asking voters to rate their trust in state government. Dyck compared the data to varying degrees of direct democracy by looking at the number of initiatives in different states. He found that people in states with frequent use of ballot initiatives are more than 10 percentage points less likely to trust their state government than those without.

What's more, this distrust then affects how people vote, particularly when it comes to the budget. In a follow-up [article](#), Dyck argues that people who don't trust their representatives tend to support more conservative fiscal policy.

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“People end up voting to minimize government because they don’t feel that government is functionally competent,” he said.

Distrusting voters limit their government’s ability to exercise its powers while increasing reliance on legislation through initiatives, creating a feedback loop. Many people have raised concerns about the increasing use of ballot initiatives in states like California and Colorado. In a speech at the [American Academy of Arts and Sciences](#) in October, California’s Chief Justice Ronald George said it plainly.

“Frequent amendments — coupled with the implicit threat of more in the future — have rendered our state government dysfunctional, at least in times of severe economic decline.”

In 1978, California voters passed an amendment to the state’s constitution that capped property taxes and required a two-thirds vote in the [Legislature](#) to pass a state budget. Voters in Colorado have placed similar [limitations](#) on their government’s ability to raise taxes. And many more constraints have followed in each state.

“Among the things it’s done through the initiative is denuded our Legislature of much of its authority,” said [John Straayer](#), a professor of political science at [Colorado State University](#) in Fort Collins. He said term limits have weakened institutional knowledge and strict taxation limitations have forced government to turn to fees and budget tricks. “With the initiative process you don’t have the benefit of hearings and debate.”

While people are largely supportive of direct democracy, it seems they are savvy enough to see the wisdom of this last point, at least in part.

A recent poll by the [Public Policy Institute of California](#) found that 56 percent of the state’s adults think policy decisions made by voters are “probably better” than decisions made by the governor or the [Legislature](#). But it also found that eight in 10 people support changes to the state’s current system that would allow the Legislature and the sponsor of an initiative to work on the bill and seek compromises before a vote. They also supported increasing public disclosure of the money behind ballots, which are often funded by interest groups or wealthy individuals.

“They see a role for direct democracy, but they don’t think its perfect,” said [Mark Baldassare](#), president of the institute. “They see a role for it because the governor and Legislature are not getting done what they see should be done.”

Dyck argues that support for initiatives comes from deep within the American psyche.

“People have this fundamental belief and support for the institution of direct democracy because they think it has this fit with the democratic creed in the U.S.,” he said. Direct democracy equals more democracy, which equals better.

Dyck and Baldassare co-wrote a [paper](#) in *Public Opinion Quarterly*’s fall issue that talked about this “iron law” in American democracy. They showed that despite consistent support, if asked the right questions, people show more nuanced views of the institution and widespread support for reforms. But both agree that while voters may support reforms, direct democracy is not going anywhere.

“I can’t think of anything that ever made it to the ballot” that would have substantially rolled back

direct democracy in California, Baldassare said. What's left is only one question. "Given that we do have an initiative process and increasing use of the ballot to make decisions, how do we make the most of that?"

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