



2018 Policy Report

Constituency Awareness Impact On 2018 Ballot Initiatives

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Introduction:

The 2018 Mid-term Elections offered a unique look at how high intensity national elections can alter the outcomes of ballot policy initiatives. Voter registration surges offer the opportunity for increased political participation for candidates, and that's a "good thing." But at what expense does it come to state and local policy agendas?

California witnessed a huge surge to its voter rolls in 2018. So much so that it was the crest of the "Blue Wave" that swept the country that included overturning seven seats previously held by Republicans, including *all* the seats in the Republican stronghold of Orange County. Political anxiety, around the Trump presidency and the rise of negative political discourse was a great motivator around the country for political action. Mid-term elections rarely see the level of civic engagement that was demonstrated this year. Turnout was equivalent to that of a Presidential election. In California, it was the highest voter turnout since 2008 during the Obama phenomenon. While it has been customary for the President's party to lose seats in the mid-terms, they usually lose "open seats" due to retirements or redistricting. We have rarely witnessed partisan entrenchments overturned in the way it occurred in 2018.

The House turnover is being considered a result of a "Trump backlash." Political attitudes were driven by the anxieties created around the unconventionality and unpredictability of Donald Trump, and centered largely in districts carried by Hillary Clinton in November, 2016 (save a few exceptions). It is no doubt that political anxiety around Trump drove an ideological party shift in the control of the House of Representatives in Congress and many state races, including those in the South. However, how did this Blue Wave influence voter behaviors as they related to ballot referendums and policy initiatives? Did voter choices on candidates align with their choices on issues?

In California, there were ten (10) statewide ballot initiatives that were largely aligned with "Quality of Life" and infrastructure issues (Changing Daylight Savings time was not). Each of these initiatives represented the potential for significant policy changes locally and statewide, and in many ways would have reflected a significant departure in the same ways voter shifted their voter preferences around candidates. State and local governments relied historically disadvantaged and underserved populations to weigh in on these propositions. How did these ballot initiatives fare on election night? Were voters as conscience of their voting patterns around issues as they were

about candidates? Lastly, were candidates and campaigns cognizant of their Constituents levels of awareness around issues that mattered to them?

Research Background:

Political sophistication has been an emerging area of study since the early 1990s when issues and ideology converged in the 1992 Presidential elections. An incumbent President (George Hubert Walker Bush) was challenged within his party by a political outsider (businessman Ross Perot) and was facing a generational challenge from the opposition party (Gov. Bill Clinton). At the center of the challenge was President Bush's inability to sustain supply side, or "Trickledown" economics called "Reaganomics in the 1980s."ⁱⁱ Trickle down Economics, a theory that has long been proven false, suggests that economic prosperity from huge tax cuts that the rich enjoyed from lower taxes would trickle down to the middle class and subsequently the poor.ⁱⁱⁱ Reaganomics was simply unsustainable. In 1988, candidate (then Vice President Bush) made a campaign promise not to raise taxes, the infamous, "Read My Lips, No New Taxes." In his first term, he had to raise taxes to sustain the federal budget. By 1992, the country was in recession and Bush I was politically vulnerable. The economy was the national referendum, and the quandary was how to get the electorate to understand the complications of economic recovery. Candidate Perot pulled out a bunch of charts to explain his new plan, which confused the public even more. Candidate Clinton did it in four simple words, "I feel your pain," the other four were, "It's the Economy, Stupid." It was during this time "low information" voters emerged as a focus of political study.^{iv} Since that time, political sophistication has been used in ways to get unsophisticated voters to vote against own interests.

Fast forward to the 2000 Presidential when Vice President Al Gore was deemed "too sophisticated" for voters to understand. The counter to that sophistication was, "Who would you rather sit down to have a beer with?" the rest is history... Fast forward even further to 2008 when low information voters were actually an "outreach strategy" by the Democratic Party that led to the dramatic victory of electing the first African American President. By 2016, the low information voter was actually Donald Trump's targeted base. The common definition of the low information voter is someone who is not politically engaged, knows little about politics or politicians, and votes based on little information or other personality traits having little to do with ideology or a partisan platform. They are also sometimes called "misinformation voters" because they can be easily swayed by misinformation (inaccurate information) or disinformation (intentional untruths or outright lies). In the context of national elections, they're seen as "swing voters" because they're either Independents with no partisan affiliation or infrequently voting partisans—not particularly married to a party platform or position. Independents, at 40%, now represent the largest voting segment of the American political electorate. That's a large segment of the voting population to be considered uninformed or sparsely informed. Thus, is why we've witnessed such large swings in voting unpredictability in the last four Presidential transitions (1992, 2000, 2008, 2016). With no clear ideological preferences, their personal preferences and limits are based on their lack of political knowledge, which dictate their voting choices. For a democracy built on clear and distinct political ideologies, that's problematic. Because it's based on having an *informed electorate*, something we're moving further away from day by day as anti-intellectualism become the norm for civic, social and political engagement.

The Republican Party has become the party of the wealthy and non-college educated, while the Democratic Party has become the party of the college educated and non-whites.^v While each party appears to have a divergence in ideological stratification, they also have a segment of their parties that have a convergence on issues tied to quality of life (poverty, wage inequality and health care). For Republicans, it's poor and working class non-college educated whites. For Democrats, it's poor and working class non-whites, with some college education. While these ideological segments belong to different parties, they share the same dilemmas. What is it that causes low information voters, be

they low income, low education or low efficacy (no political engagement) to choose such divergent candidates? Outside of party identification, it's the messaging. The more uninformed and less educated Trump supporters were, the more they gravitated toward Trump, regardless of whether he was seen as truthful.^{vi} By the way, he won the election. We also witnessed some of this play out in 2018.

It is with this backdrop, the study of constituency awareness became a focused field of study for the Dymally Institute, with Los Angeles County serving as a social laboratory for political behavior research.

Research Survey

To determine what role voter sophistication played in the referendum election results in California, the Mervyn Dymally African American Political & Economic Institute commissioned a Countywide survey to assess Constituency Awareness among L.A. County voters. The survey was conducted by an independent research firm two weeks before the November 6th election (October 17-23, 2018).^{vii} The survey sampled 1,000 voters across age, partisanship, gender, class, race and geography. The sampling error was plus/minus 3.1%. The baseline research sought to extract from voters what they know about candidates and issues, with an emphasis on issues as the basis for being politically engaged. The survey also sought to extract Efficacy levels beyond voting as a motivation for political engagement. What political behaviors did L.A. County voters engage that led up to making a voting choice?

The initial survey inquiry focused on government solving problems. When asked what was the "Most Important" problem facing society they wanted government to solve, the top ten (10) responses, in this order, were:

1. Political climate
2. Healthcare
3. Social Inequality
4. Environment
5. Poverty/Income Inequality
6. Affordable Housing
7. Education
8. Immigration
9. Homelessness
10. Liberal Policies/Big Government

When queried if the respondents had personally engaged (Efficacy question) on any of the issues they had identified, 59% responded "Yes," 29% responded "No," and 11% preferred not to say. When queried HOW they engaged on these issues, the top five responses were;

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|-------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 1. Talked/Educated others | 13% |
| 2. Attended a rally/march | 13% |
| 3. Supported candidates that shared their views | 11% |
| 4. Volunteer | 9% |
| 5. Contact Elected Officials | 8% |

In seeking to determine how respondents awareness intersected with their levels of civic engagement, 88% responded that they followed "Government & politics" very closely (48%) or somewhat closely (40%). Seventy-three percent (73%) also stated that they followed people and events in their community very closely (22%) or somewhat

closely (51%). When asked how that awareness translated to engagement, 10 being very highly engaged, 0 being not civically engaged at all, the Mean score of the respondents were 5.62.

Length of civic engagement was surveyed, seeking to capture generational efficacy and/or political shift periods. 37% have been engaged ten (10) years or less. 25% have been engaged eleven (11) years or more, with 12% of the respondents being civically engaged 20 years or more. When queried how engaged respondents had been *this year*, respondents were involved in engagements that ranged from 78% (letter-writing/petition signing) to 13% (neighborhood council involvement).

When queried to self-assess their levels of political awareness, 24% considered themselves “extremely aware,” 43% considered themselves “very aware” and 29% considered themselves “somewhat aware.”

When queried to self-assess how that awareness translated to political activity, 20% considered themselves “extremely/very active,” 37% “somewhat active,” and 42% not active.

In terms of the November election, 94% stated that they “definitely” planned to vote, with 3% stating that they would “probably” vote. When queried as to when the election was, 78% responded November 6th, 17% responded some other time in the month of November (other than November 6th).

2018 California Statewide Ballot Initiatives:

There were eleven (11) statewide initiatives that qualified for the November 6th ballot. They all sought to address “quality of life” issues impacting significant segments of the population, except two (Prop. 7 and Prop. 12). They were:

- Prop. 1 – Bonds to Fund Veteran & Affordable Housing
- Prop. 2 – Amend Existing Housing Program for Mental Illness
- Prop. 3 – Bond for Water and Environmental Projects
- Prop. 4 – Bond for Children’s Hospital Construction
- Prop. 5 - Senior Property Reduction
- Prop. 6 – Repeal of Fuel Tax Approved by Voters
- Prop. 7 – Change Daylight Saving Time Period
- Prop. 8 – Regulates Kidney Dialysis Treatment Charges
- Prop. 10 – Rental Control on Residential Property
- Prop. 11 – Emergency Ambulance Employees on-call
- Prop. 12 – Farm Animal Confinement Standards

There was an attempt, through referendum process, to break up the state into three states (Prop. 9). It was ruled unconstitutional by the California State Supreme Court and ordered off the ballot. The ballot initiative process seeks to create public policy by voter referendum. It is termed “Direct Democracy” because it comes outside of the state legislature, and when Representative Democracy fails to address the policy desires of a segment of the population, that segment has the option to “take it to the people.” It follows the fundamental premise of egalitarianism (one man, one vote) in “letting the people decide.” James Madison also called direct democracy the most dangerous form of democracy because it could lead to governing by ignoramus (an uninformed, or ignorant electorate). He also feared it could lead to “Tyranny of the Majority.” However, informed or not, the electorate cannot be prevented for voting.

California had a record 19 million people on the voter rolls for the November election, 1.5 million more than the Presidential election of 2016 and 850,000 new registered voters added within the 60 days prior to the election.^{viii}

California had a historical voter turnout for a Mid-term election. Of all registered voters throughout the state, 64.5% voted on November 6th (compared to 42.20% in 2014, 59.59% in 2010 and 56.19 in 2006). Los Angeles County also had a historic voter turnout, but it was lower than the statewide turnout at 58.1%.

The statewide election outcomes on ballot initiatives were as follows:

- Prop. 1 – Bonds to Fund Veteran & Affordable Housing (Passed)
- Prop. 2 – Amend Existing Housing Program for Mental Illness (Passed)
- Prop. 3 – Bond for Water and Environmental Projects (Failed)
- Prop. 4 – Bond for Children’s Hospital Construction (Passed)
- Prop. 5 - Senior Property Reduction (Failed)
- Prop. 6 – Repeal of Fuel Tax Approved by Voters (Failed)
- Prop. 7 – Change Daylight Saving Time Period (Passed)
- Prop. 8 – Regulates Kidney Dialysis Treatment Charges (Failed)
- Prop. 10 – Rental Control on Residential Property (Failed)
- Prop. 11 – Emergency Ambulance Employees on-call (Passed)
- Prop. 12 – Farm Animal Confinement Standards (Passed)

The Countywide election outcomes were as follows:

- Prop. 1 – Bonds to Fund Veteran & Affordable Housing (Passed)
- Prop. 2 – Amend Existing Housing Program for Mental Illness (Passed)
- Prop. 3 – Bond for Water and Environmental Projects (Passed)
- Prop. 4 – Bond for Children’s Hospital Construction (Passed)
- Prop. 5 - Senior Property Reduction (Failed)
- Prop. 6 – Repeal of Fuel Tax Approved by Voters (Failed)
- Prop. 7 – Change Daylight Saving Time Period (Passed)
- Prop. 8 – Regulates Kidney Dialysis Treatment Charges (Failed)
- Prop. 10 – Rental Control on Residential Property (Failed)
- Prop. 11 – Emergency Ambulance Employees on-call (Passed)
- Prop. 12 – Farm Animal Confinement Standards (Passed)

With the exception of Prop. 3, the election results in the County replicated the election results in the state.

Post Election Analysis:

The voter turnout in Los Angeles County certainly reflected our survey’s response that political anxiety was the national sentiment for this Mid-term election. It wasn’t just about Republicans and Democrats. It was, “What are we going to do to stop (or check) Trump.” The first 18 months of the Trump administration, and the follies that have ensued, has caused much trepidation among a highly polarized electorate. The misuse (and abuse) of social media, as well as the state of domestic and foreign affairs has caused America’s political climate to move to the front burner of issues important to the American people. California and Los Angeles County offered a similar sentiment.

The survey’s next five “most important” issues (health care, social inequality, the environment, poverty and affordable housing) were all reflected in the state’s referendum agenda this year, statewide propositions sought to

create policy solutions to arrest these pressing social and economic conditions. Los Angeles County voting electorate appeared to have at least engaged these social/economic dilemmas on some surface levels, while efficacy to “do something about them” have been stagnant or slow. Voter turnout was less than the statewide percentage, but only by five points. Still, it was significantly less than the polling suggested. Constituency awareness in Los Angeles focused on housing/rental costs, homeless and criminal justice in terms of what respondents reflected, at moderate to low levels—meaning the electorate was mindful of these issues even if they didn’t civically engage them on levels beyond voting. Overall, the driving incentive for the large voter turnout was political (climate) anxiety.

Since 2006, political research has sought to analyze the effects of new voters on voter sophistication, as well as the voting patterns of partisan voters, poor voters and historically disadvantaged voters. Complicating this analysis has been the political culture shifts that have made voting more personal, personality driven and more ideologue sanctioned (meaning more extreme on the fringes for both the left and the right). On its face, fewer barriers to voting makes sense. That is, until the ideologues seek to impose their varying ideologies on voting segments that have little institutional memory regarding partisan voting, party platforms and positions and the responsibilities of civic duties. The last five election cycles have offered new and unanticipated election outcomes. Elections has always been a “numbers game.” However, in the push to open up the political process both parties have used new voter registrants to capitalize on holding or changing power on election day. Simply put, several studies have shown that the party with the most new registered voters has an advantage on election day.^{ix} As was the case in 2006, 2010 and 2014, that’s exactly what happened in 2018. The Democrats targeted districts in which Hillary Clinton won in 2016 and built on that base. Even in Republican districts where Donald Trump didn’t fare so well. Then, add to the equation districts where Republicans voted with Donald Trump on controversial economic issues (namely the tax cut and the stripping some components of the Affordable Care Act), and it spelled disaster for the Republican Party.

The reasoning lies in the sophistication of new voters. Some research has shown that less sophisticated voters are more inclined to engage in economic voting (vote their pocket book) than more sophisticated voters.^x Other factors that play into new voter behavior are self-interest (which nearly all voters engage in), limited information, new information and selective voting (voting for a candidate or a singular issue). Partisan new voters tend to vote on whatever is put in front of them (voting slates, partisan literature, etc.). Independents are more likely to ticket-split or bullet vote because they have no partisan allegiance and limited political knowledge. Since they don’t have a partisan filter, they tend to over-rely on media for their political decision making...whether it is fact based or not. Lastly, Independents are more personality driven. They tend to vote for candidates they like (or don’t like). The 2016 Presidential Election was the definitive reflection of this. A vote for Trump wasn’t necessarily a vote for Trump, rather a vote against Hillary, and vis versa. Even partisan voting reflected this type of behavioral voting.

Political choices for candidates tend to be much less complicated than for political choices regarding issues. New voters are often inundated with complexed ballot propositions, with deceptive names and even more deceptive language that confuses even sophisticated, experienced voters. So when special interests jump in the middle of policy referendum fights, it is often at the expense of the voter’s interest and not their own. Both parties, and the “third house” (lobbyists) now realize that new voters serve as the “tipping point” for elections, and that voter registration campaigns are mostly likely candidate driven versus issues driven. New voters represent the low hanging fruit by which low information campaigns and messaging (no matter which party or special interest does it) can influence the outcome of candidate elections *and* ballot propositions. That brings us to the analysis of the November 6th election outcomes of the ballot propositions in California. New voters were the “tipping point” for several propositions.

Looking at the election results of the eleven propositions, none were considered mandates (65% and over). Three propositions (2, 4, 12) received over 60% of the vote, which reflects that the electorate was comfortable in

voting for this public policy. The other eight propositions received between 59.9% and 50.7%. One proposition, Prop. 3 (Water Bond Measure) lost statewide 50.7% to 49.3% (however, it won in L.A. County 50.30% to 49.70%). The statewide vote margin was 254,000+ votes, well within the number of new voter registrants. What role do you think voter sophistication played in this election outcome? Some, I would theorize.

Then there were the “quality of life” referendums, Proposition 5 (Senior Property Reduction), Proposition 8 (Regulating Kidney Dialysis Treatment Charges), and Proposition 10 (Rent Control on Residential Property). Each of these proposition went directly to personal economic well-being of the voter involved (the classic definition of pocketbook [Economic] voting). And all were defeated. For a number of reasons, but two factors played heavily in all three; low information messaging and new voters. In the case of Prop. 10, all segments of the electorate (renters and homeowners) had a vested interest in the legislation (to vote for it or against it), but the special interest in the mix (the Apartment Owners Association) created the messaging and largely misinformed the voters about the intent of the legislation. The same was the case for Proposition 8, where the medical special interests highjacked the messaging and the concerns over patient care and medical costs got lost in the message.

The most unique referendum outcome was Proposition 6, where a state electorate that usually tax adverse agree to leave a tax in place for the sake of the state’s prosperity. Californians agreed to continue to tax themselves in order to fix roads and highways and continue the progress made of repairing the state’s aging infrastructure. This was an example of “sociotropic voting,” where voters voted based on the perceived health of the economy and wanted to maintain that status quo for the benefit of the whole (not just themselves).

Lastly, though not a ballot proposition, a referendum on criminal justice and police corruption—issues close to low income, low education and historically disadvantaged constituents—played itself out at the ballot box in a most unexpected way when political outsider, Alex Villanueva, challenged the incumbent sheriff of Los Angeles County, Jim O’Donnell, and won. With literally no name recognition, Villanueva, a retired deputy sheriff campaigned on the issue of ending corruption in L.A. County Jails which resonated in nearly every community in the County. It was the first time in over 100 years that a challenger beat an incumbent for the office of L.A. County Sheriff. This is an instance in which a low information campaign worked in favor of those who are considered less sophisticated voters. Many voted on their own experience, or the experience of family members and friends, and the public was very aware of this problem and very attentive to this issue through it wasn’t on the ballot as a referendum item. The voters were sophisticated enough to exact their attitudes on the incumbent and force a regime change in the Sheriffs Dept.

Conclusion:

Constituency awareness is something that key stakeholders, be they elected officials, political operatives, community leaders and government officials, should pay attention to on a greater scale. The fact that “political climate” was the most pressing issue in our survey offers some new insights as to what drives voters to the polls. While certain candidates and a particular ballot referendum may raise voter interests, quality of life issues can take a backseat to concerns about the stability of the Democracy. The unique set of circumstances on the national scene can drum up anxieties on the state and local levels. All levels of political sophistication understood it.

There also needs to be a greater focus on understanding how political sophistication works among new voters, and how easily they can be targeted for mis-messaging in critical election cycles. The State’s propositions didn’t always align with voters ideological candidate choices. We’ve seen it in the national elections before. Three presidencies out of the last four (Clinton, Bush II and Trump) used low information messaging to trick the electorate. President Obama used low information messaging to counter the opposition’s fearmongering. The point is mis-

messaging has its dangers among new, unsophisticated voters. Building an informed electorate is as essential to sustaining Democracy as voting. The public will pay attention if they are properly informed.

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ⁱⁱ George H.W. Bush had actually called Reagan's economic plan "Voodoo Economics" when they were opponents during the Republican primaries in 1988.

ⁱⁱⁱ The tax cuts came in two phases; the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 (a \$750 Billion dollars reduction in federal revenues that forced a mandatory reduction in federal spending across all agencies) and Tax Reform Act of 1986 (that lowered the tax rate for the rich from 50% to 38.5% and created several new tax loopholes, called tax incentives from investing in the economy).

^{iv} Political Scientist/Pollster, Samuel Popkin, coined the term in 1991 using the term, "low information signaling" in his book, *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns*, when describing how candidates use cues and heuristics in lieu of substantial information in determining who to vote for. In 1987, Thomas Palfrey (MIT) and Keith Poole (Carnegie-Mellon University) wrote a research study called, "The Relationship between Information, Ideology and Voting Behavior" that examined how Reagan was able to beat incumbent Jimmy Carter by appealing to uninformed voters.

^v Chalabi, Mona, "How will educational status affect the U.S. election result?" *The Guardian*, October 16th, 2016.

^{vi} Fording, Richard and Schram, Sanford, "Low information voters are a crucial part of Trump support," *The Washington Post*, November 7, 2016

^{vii} The survey was conducted by the public opinion research firm of EVITARUS

^{viii} "California Sets record as Voter Registration Tops 19 Million," *U.S. News World Report*, October 2, 2018

^{ix} <https://www.readingeagle.com/news/article/party-that-has-the-most-new-registered-voters-has-an-advantage>, October 9 2018,

^x Gomez, Brad T. and Wilson, J. Matthew, "Political Sophistication and Economic Voting in the American Electorate: A Theory of Heterogeneous Attribution. 2001. *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 45, No. 4, pp. 899-914