

DO CERTAIN CATEGORIES OF INITIATIVES IN CALIFORNIA
RECEIVE GREATER OVERALL MEDIA ATTENTION?

A Thesis

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by

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ii

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Abstract
of
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California has utilized the initiative system since 1911. During this time, the initiative system in California has evolved into the ‘fourth’ branch of government. Initiatives play an important role in government by providing the voting public with a means of bypassing the legislature to enact policy or change. Yet unlike candidate races, there are fewer signals available for voters to use in determining how to vote on initiatives. For this reason the role of the media is especially important. In this thesis I examine whether certain categories of initiatives in California between 2000-2014 received greater media attention than others.

To conduct this thesis, I collected data from the National Conference of State Legislatures and the California Secretary of State to obtain citizen initiatives that were placed on the ballot from 2000-2014. I then performed a search on the Lexis-Nexis database for newspaper articles about the 67 initiatives in the data set. I collected information from Lexis-Nexis on how many articles, words, and paragraphs each individual measure received between January and the date of the election for their respective years. This information was then used to sort each individual measure into one of the nine categories for analysis.

The results of this study indicate that the nine categories of initiatives received roughly the same amount of media attention. While minor differences were observed, a simple t-test showed that the differences between the categories were not statistically significant. However, a few controversial social measures earned a widely disproportionate share of media attention. I also found some evidence that media attention did not influence initiative passage rate. Additionally I found signs that initiatives can receive little media attention before passage but subsequently prompt much controversy.

My thesis indicates that we need to give more attention to the role of the media in the initiative process. Initiatives remain a central feature of California government, and California voters continue to rely on the same main sources of information to inform them about measures on upcoming elections. If as this study suggests there is not enough information provided about important initiatives by traditional news outlets, where and how can we expect voters to obtain all of the information necessary to vote?

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgements.....	vii
List of Tables	viii
List of Figures.....	ix
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Initiatives in the United States	2
California’s Initiative System	4
Agenda Setting.....	5
Why Are Initiatives Important?	8
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	10
Voter Cues and Sources of Information.....	10
Language as a Barrier	14
Media	17
3. METHODOLOGY	22
4. ANALYSIS.....	33
Subject and Category Analysis	33
Individual Election Year Analysis	36
Passing and Failing Initiatives	40
5. CONCLUSION	48
Appendix A. Category Determinations	60
References	66

LIST OF TABLES

Tables		Page
1.	Table 3.1 NCSL Data.....	24
2.	Table 3.2 Categories of Analysis.....	29
3.	Table 4.1 Category Totals.....	34
4.	Table 4.2 Data Findings by Year.....	37
5.	Table 4.3 Passing Ballot Measures.....	42

LIST OF FIGURES

Figures		Page
1.	1.1 Current Status of Initiatives and Referenda in America	3
2.	4.1 Proposition Article Count	44

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

The term initiative in the context of American state government does not refer to a politician's drive to get things done, but has a more general context-- it is a law initiated by the people. The initiative process developed based on the idea that regular citizens should have the power and right to propose and pass legislation without the consent of their elected representatives (Matsusaka, 2004). Voter initiatives have grown in popularity across the United States, and especially in California. Voter initiatives are a means for the people to set, and influence the policy agenda, bypassing the legislature to enact policies that the voters want. Initiatives can, and do range in topic from imposing new taxes, restricting taxes and the powers of the legislature, reforming the criminal justice system, to imposing term limits.

The continued use of the initiative system in California as well as the variety of measures presented on the ballot each election year makes the study of initiatives necessary. While ample research has been conducted on public opinion of the initiative system, how initiatives impact policy at the state and local levels, and a variety of other topics, less attention has been paid to the role of media and the degree of media attention that these potential agenda setting initiatives receive. More specifically very few studies have looked into whether any particular topic, or subject matter for initiatives receives greater news and media coverage, and in turn is given greater agenda setting power. Since the initiative system serves as a bypass from regular government processes,

initiatives that are accepted by voters are increasingly difficult to change. For instance in California, initiatives approved by voters can only be removed or changed by the court, or by passing a new initiative that proposes changes to the existing initiative (PPIC, 2013). Given California's continuous use of the initiative process since 1911, and the lasting power initiatives can have on state government functions it is important to study and understand how initiatives and their use have evolved in California as well as how other factors may be influencing voters, like media. The remainder of this chapter will provide background information on the issue of initiatives and media attention in California.

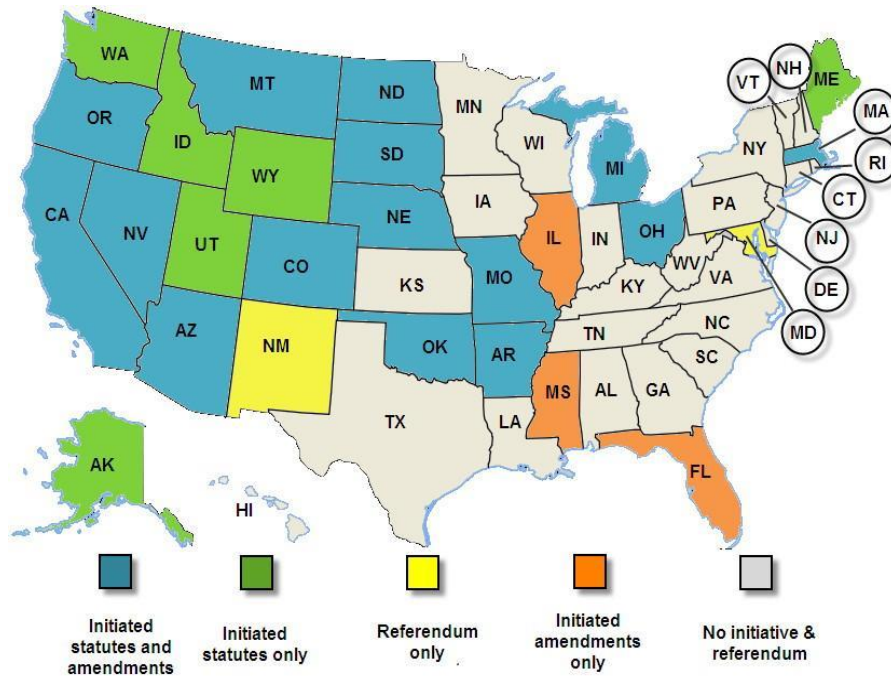
Initiatives in the United States

The initiative process has been a part of United States government longer than many other well-known reforms, such as term limits for the President, and universal women's suffrage. The first state to adopt the initiative process was South Dakota in 1898 (Simmons, 1997). The rise of the initiative in the United States is a result of the Progressive movement in the 1800s, following the impact of the Industrial Revolution which gave rise to powerful business across the United States. For example, in California, the public perceived that the Southern Pacific Railroad had too much power to overtly influence politicians and state government. The initiative was seen as a means to circumvent these special interests influence on government and restore the power to the voice of the public (Simmons, 1997).

There are two main types of initiatives-- direct and indirect. The direct system allows voters to place legislation proposals directly onto the ballot after obtaining the

necessary signatures. The indirect process submits the proposal to the legislature which may enact or reject the legislation (NCSL, 2012). Currently twenty-four states and the District of Columbia include the right to use the initiative process (NCSL, 2015). Each state has a slightly different system in place for the use of the initiative system and the ability for voters to use either the direct or indirect initiative process. Figure 1.1 shows a map of the United States and which states allow for initiatives and referendum as well as what types of initiative the state government accepts. Legislation restricting and enforcing propositions varies widely and includes how initiatives can make it onto the ballot—directly or indirectly, but also what topics initiatives can cover, and whether or not an initiative can be used to change the state’s constitution.

Figure 1.1 Current Status of Initiatives and Referenda in American States



Source: Maryland Reporter Amihere, D. (2012, June 21)

California's Initiative System

California gave voters the power of the initiative, referendum and recall in 1911; since then these mechanisms of direct democracy have become an integral part of the democratic process (Simmons, 1997). The initiative process has been especially important, with some commentators referring to it as California's fourth branch of government (Simmons, 1997). California currently only allows for the direct initiative process. When the power was first granted in 1911 it allowed for indirect propositions but only nine of the fourteen total indirect initiatives qualified, and only one was enacted by the legislature (Simmons, 1997). California removed the indirect initiative option in 1966.

Initiatives give the public the ability to voice their opinions and make decisions that directly influence the state government, as well as issues that impact their daily lives. California uses the initiative process more than any other state with the exception of Oregon (PPIC, 2013). Since the adoption of the initiative process in California a total of 1,922 initiatives have been circulated to the California voting public. Of those 1,922 initiatives 363, about 19%, have qualified for the ballot (SOS, 2015). Of those 363 initiatives, California voters approved 123, or approximately 34% (SOS, 2015). With subjects ranging from imposing new taxes, imposing term limits on politicians, changing criminal sentences, issuing bonds for the California High Speed Rail, to providing funding for afterschool programs, initiatives have the power to make direct changes on a wide variety of issues in society that affect the daily lives of voters. Article II Section 1 of

the California Constitution reinforces the power of initiatives and states that “all political power is inherent in the people. Government is instituted for their protection, security, and benefit, and they have the right to alter or reform it when the public good may require” (Simmons, 1997).

Agenda Setting

Initiatives are not just a tool for the public. Public officials including the legislature, the governor, as well as policy entrepreneurs can, and do also utilize them. Policy entrepreneurs as defined by John Kingdon (1984) are individuals who have the knowledge, and following to get their definition and often solution to a public problem addressed, and focused on by the legislature and the people. The political or policy entrepreneur is responsible for knowing when a window of opportunity arises for a particular policy problem, and has the ability to combine the three streams--policy, politics and problem to incite action. In the instance of initiatives, policy entrepreneurs are able to make their problem known to the public and the legislature by embarking on the initiative process. Starting the process does not mean that the problem will be solved, or that the initiative will be enacted by the people, but the process does bring important issues to the stage of California politics.

Media

California is one of the leaders in terms of media markets, and races in California often appear in the national news (Korey, 2009). Millions of dollars annually go towards media campaigns for California issues and elections. However, this does not include

unpaid media coverage in California which disproportionately focuses on national or statewide races, and occasionally a few particularly hot topic initiatives (Korey, 2009). Media attention overwhelmingly focuses on the unusual and contested issues within an election cycle. This occurs at the cost of little coverage for routine government processes, and in an election cycle, initiatives that relate more to day-to-day activities or policy (Korey, 2009).

Korey's assertion that media only gives attention to the unusual is not always true. In 1978 California voters were given the task of deciding on Proposition 13--which limits property tax increases, and imposes a $\frac{2}{3}$ vote requirement to pass any tax measure. Despite similar propositions appearing in other states at the same time, California's Proposition 13 received national and international attention (Magleby, 1984). This wave of attention for Proposition 13 meant that both the media and the public's attention was focused on the issue of property taxes rather than the candidates running in the primary, or the other ballot initiatives appearing on the 1978 ballot. Magleby (1984), argues that media attention is responsible for a substantial amount of the growth of interest in direct democracy over the years. Media and news outlets thrive on political conflict, and initiatives which are often written by special interests, or at the very least are one sided provide an almost continuous source of potential political conflict for news media to report on.

The choice by the media to focus on the 'newsworthy' stories leads to many important initiatives not getting any, or hardly any media coverage. Lascher (1997) found media coverage of initiatives to be highly skewed after conducting a Lexis- Nexis search

for media coverage of propositions from the 1996 election. He looked specifically at two different initiatives from the 1996 election—Proposition 214 dealing with health care, and Proposition 209 dealing with affirmative action. The study found that there were almost a thousand stories about Proposition 209 exclusively, whereas Proposition 214 had only four exclusive stories (Lascher, 1997). This difference in media coverage can impact voter turnout for specific issues often referred to as drop-off. Drop-off refers to the amount of voters who vote for a specific issue—often candidates, or one ballot measure and then do not vote the remaining contests or measures on the ballot. Lascher (1997) found with Proposition 214 the drop-off rate was almost 10%. This continuing practice by media outlets to make determinations of what is worthy of news coverage directly impacts and can limit public access to information on all of the issues featured in upcoming ballots. While it is unrealistic to expect equal media representation for all measures on a ballot, some form of base media attention for every issue on an upcoming ballot may be a better alternative than relying on news to determine what the public wants to or should be informed on.

The media plays an important role in all political decisions, and elections, as it has the potential power to sway, direct or move public attention towards specific policy goals, agendas and outcomes (Shultz, 2002). Media ‘guru’ Tony Schwartz states, “The media can...elevate the lowly and humiliate the proud, by directing the attention of millions on the same event and in the same manner” (Shultz, 2002). Throughout history media has held enormous power, and responsibility in framing issues to the public so that they could gather enough information to form an opinion, and in some cases feel

comfortable voting on issues of national, state or local importance. The role of the media in elections, politics and political campaigns is important to recognize. While media does not ultimately decide the election, the information consumed and presented for the public on various media outlets can influence some voters in their decision on how to vote, or whether to vote come Election Day. It is also important to understand exactly what role the media plays, and how it can help frame policy agendas and public attention.

Why Are Initiatives Important?

With the continued rise and use of direct democracy over the years, interest and research on the initiative process has also expanded and branched off in multiple directions. However, a recurring theme in the research is whether or not voters are able to get all of the information they need in order to make an informed voting decision on initiative and ballot measures. All initiatives propose new legislation, or seek to change existing legislation. If all initiatives do not get adequate attention from media sources how are voters supposed to make an informed decision on how the initiative will impact their lives? While there are alternative sources of information available to voters, many require time, and some degree of effort to sift through and navigate in order to find the answers to questions they may have about ballot measures. News and media offer a wealth of information that is easily digestible and typically only requires minimal effort. There are downsides to a system that relies on easily digestible information for the success of its democracy, however, given the difficulty of even getting voters to the polls for elections today, without significant strides in civic engagement and education this system works, despite being flawed.

The initiative is supposed to be the power, and the voice of the people. However, given the prominence and variety of initiatives in California, and declining voter turnout for elections nationwide, it is important to examine what initiatives receive the most attention in an election cycle, and acknowledge any trends. If it is difficult for individuals to obtain a full picture of what the initiatives on a given election cycle's ballot are, how can we as a society expect them to make informed decisions? This thesis will attempt to address this question of whether certain subjects of initiatives receive greater media attention in California. This thesis presents analysis of 67 ballot measures placed on the ballot by voters in California between 2000-2014 to determine if any particular subject of initiative receives greater media attention than others. For instance if measures dealing with social issues receive more attention than tax measures, there could be significant policy and broader societal implications if voters do not know about these measures.

The remaining chapters of this thesis will explore this issue of media attention and ballot measures more thoroughly. The second chapter will provide a literature review of past studies on the initiative system. The third chapter will address the methodology used for this research study, and the fourth and fifth chapters will present the findings and conclusions respectively.

Chapter Two

LITERATURE REVIEW

Initiatives are a tool of direct democracy. Unlike candidate elections there are less cues for voters to look for on how to vote for initiatives. While candidates and political parties may support, oppose, and even endorse initiatives, these potential signals are not visible on the ballot to help voters make their decisions on how to vote. A focal point for research on initiatives has been how voters gather information to vote for propositions without those cues by focusing on elite endorsements, media endorsements, knowledge of status quo, and rationality of voters (Magleby, 1984; Bowler & Donovan, 1998). Other research on initiatives has focused on barriers of understanding such as lengthy ballots, and complicated wording for initiatives (Reilly, 2005; League of Women Voters, 2015), and the role and impact of media on initiative elections (Nicholson, 2003; Smith, 2003). The following is a literature review summarizing previous research on voter initiatives related to voter cues, knowledge, rationality, barriers to understanding, and the role of the media.

Voter Cues and Sources of Information

In 1984 David Magleby examined how voters across The United States handled the issue of voting for ballot propositions over time. Magleby's (1984) book *Direct Legislation: Voting on Ballot Propositions in the United States* sought to address the overall process of how Americans have dealt with the direct democracy process of ballot initiatives. Magleby (1984) found that due to the lack of political party identification for propositions, and the relatively weak position of political parties in the United States

propositions have focused on and amplified the presences of single issue politics. The public is increasingly judging candidates and positions on a few topics--abortion, immigration etc. These are topics that most voters are likely to have some form of opinion on, and that base opinion can then help a voter determine a position for voting on initiatives on the topic. However, most of the issues that individuals discuss, and have base opinions on are of a social nature, or are highly controversial and therefore likely discussed by many individuals over time. While these base opinions can help voters establish opinions on initiatives related to these issues, initiatives can cover a broad array of topics, some of which may not be easy to discuss on a day to day basis.

Magleby (1984) also discussed the role of media in initiative campaigns and their potential impact on voters. While newspapers are not widely utilized by voters for candidate elections where voters have multiple easy to find sources for information, the context is different for initiative campaigns and elections. For initiative elections, the source options for voters is limited making newspaper endorsements and discussions of initiatives more likely to have an impact on voter opinion, especially for issues that they do not know well (Magleby, 1984).

Bowler and Donovan (1998) also discussed the broad issue of initiative campaigns in their 1998 book *Demanding Choices*. Like Magleby, Bowler and Donovan argued that there is a lack of cues for voters to turn to when determining how to vote for initiatives. Initiatives all present new policies that would either change or attempt to maintain the status quo in society. Accordingly, Bowler and Donovan argued that a popular point of reference for voters to turn to is their knowledge of the status quo, with

the assumption that a 'no' vote on a proposition would mean a vote for a continuance of the status quo. However, this reference point relies upon voter knowledge of the status quo for the particular issue, which limits its effectiveness to areas where individuals are more likely to discuss or deal with on a daily basis. This means that these issues are also typically more straightforward, less technical, and have more clearly defined or decipherable outputs and beneficiaries (Bowler & Donovan, 1998). In the potential case In the absence of informative media coverage, there is a significant increase in the 'cost' of reducing uncertainty for voters, as they must search for 'free' information from political parties, advertisements, interest groups and other sources to garner an opinion. Given this increased opportunity cost, voters are more likely to simply vote no on propositions and initiatives that require this added 'cost' (Bowler & Donovan, 1998).

Despite the associated cost of finding information on ballot initiatives, California voters report overall support for the continued use of the initiative process, but individuals polled also tend to find it easy to identify problems with the process (Bowler & Donovan, 1998). In the 1996 Field Poll California voters gave their opinions about ballot propositions; 69% of California voters thought ballot propositions were a good thing, and 71% thought many propositions were not easily understandable for the average voter. The last point is a commonly brought up concern; information and the initiative process are too confusing for the average voter in California. A more recent survey of California residents conducted by Dyck and Baldassare (2009) had similar findings. They found that, on a general level Californians approve of and support direct democracy processes. Yet when asked more specific questions about the wording of initiatives on the

state ballot, 28% responded that initiatives were confusing and complicated, and 38% of respondents felt the initiative system was in need of reform (Dyck & Baldassare, 2009).

One of the areas Bowler and Donovan (1998) address as being too confusing is the state distributed ballot pamphlet otherwise called the voter information guide. In the 1990 Field Poll, 54% of California voters used the voter information guide as a primary resource for information on California ballot initiatives, with a majority of voters stating they used the voter information guide as at least one source of information (Bowler & Donovan, 1998). The voter information guide is written at an 8th grade reading level in an attempt to increase overall accessibility for voters of all education levels, but as Magleby (1984) noted this is a higher level than is needed for approximately one half to two-thirds of California voters (Bowler & Donovan, 1998). Bowler and Donovan (1998) researched this issue of educational attainment and sources of information used by California voters. They tested the hypothesis that higher educated individuals would be more likely to utilize “hard” information sources like the voter information guide, and newspaper editorials, while less educated individuals would utilize fewer information sources and rely on ‘easy’ sources like television advertisements, and conversations with friends and family (Bowler & Donovan, 1998). The results of this study found that less educated voters are only slightly more likely to utilize easy information sources, and utilization of radio, direct mail, and newspaper ads occurs at the same rate regardless of educational attainment (Bowler & Donovan, 1998).

Language as a Barrier for Initiatives

Shauna Reilly (2013), examined the issue of ballot language and how this impacts voter choice with the hypothesis that the more complex the ballot language gets the less likely voters will participate on the given measure. Since ballot propositions cover a wide array of policy areas it is difficult to rely on or agree on the ability of citizens to vote on issues that they have little to no knowledge or experience in. In an ideal world, citizens would spend the time to adequately research and inform themselves about the issues of each ballot proposition and candidate appearing on the ballot before casting a vote; however, the implications of such a system are highly unpractical (Reilly, 2013).

Reilly, examined participation efforts in direct democracy elections and found that they are at an all-time low, with ballot participation rates decreasing when there are multiple races on the ballot and for races at the bottom of the ballot. This creates drop-off, referred to in this study by Reilly as roll-off. Roll-off in this study was defined as voters who vote for items or races appearing on the front or top of the ballot--the main political contests-- and do not vote for other races. Nationally there is an average of 9.9% roll-off: California experiences an average roll-off rate of 10.4% (Reilly, 2013). More specifically, Reilly examined the issue of whether or not ballot question language is a barrier to participation and leads to higher roll-off for direct democracy measures. Unlike candidate elections ballot measures contain a question, not just a name, occupation and party affiliation. Using national data and ballots as a unit of analysis from 1997-2007, Reilly looked at ballot roll-off to determine if readability of ballot propositions impacts voter turnout for direct democracy elections. She gathered the question wording for each

ballot measure from the state Election Boards and the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) and evaluated them through a readability test--length of question, number of words, paragraphs, sentences, grade level required based on Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level for comprehension, and controlling for ballot position. To measure roll-off Reilly calculated the percent difference between the number of votes for top office on the ballot and the number of votes on individual ballot measures. Reilly (2013), found that there was little to no impact on roll-off from ballot position and word count, contrary to previous research and findings on the issue. However, she did find that readability has a consistent influence on roll-off of voters.

In 2015 the League of Women Voters conducted research on how voters get information for elections, and the League of Women Voters address the issue of access to information, including ensuring information in voter information guides and other publicly distributed documents are understandable to California voters. The League published its *Best Practices Manual for Official Voter Information Guides* in 2015 as an easy to use resource for election officials to make information more engaging and accessible to voters across California. To produce this manual the League worked with the Center for Civic Design. These two organizations collected and analyzed voter guides from all 58 counties in California in order to obtain a baseline for information available to voters, as well as catalog the types of presentation styles used. The League of Women Voters then conducted two sets of research interviews including potential voters, and infrequent voters from across the state to collect preferences on types of information they wanted in voter guides and what formats and channels of delivery worked best for them.

Following these initial interviews a prototype was developed and tested using 45 research sessions which asked voters to find answers to questions regarding elections, and explain their experience using the guide. This project was conducted because California has not developed a standard for the county distributed voter information guides. As it stands each county develops and produces their own version of the document, which has led to widely varied lengths, formats (pdf, online, paper, large font, audio), and even different information. Many counties facing financial limitations do not include important information including the address for the voters polling place, deadlines for registering, information about vote by mail, polling place accessibility information, and even information about receiving election materials in other languages (League of Women Voters, 2015).

The League of Women Voter's study found that plain language was not universally utilized by the counties. Greater reliance on plain language and readability would help to bridge the civic literacy gap. Common election terms like split voting, redistricting, rebuttal, and early voting need to be explained in plain language to ensure voters understand and know what is necessary and required for them to vote on Election Day (League of Women Voters, 2015). Dealing with issues like this will help address issues like voter drop off, as voters are more likely to turn out to vote in an election if they are able to receive and understand information about the election and what they are being asked to vote on.

Media

Media has played an important role in government as a source of information about elections, policy, and general current events. However, media coverage of initiatives is often brief, as ballot measures do not often receive high priority (Center for Governmental Studies, 2008). For many news outlets initiatives are not as exciting or sellable for stories as events that depict tragedy, violence, or scandals (Center for Governmental Studies, 2008).

Media outlets have the ability to focus the attention of the public on certain issues and it is their job to provide a full and complete picture of what is going on in the world. Despite this fact media outlets continue to give candidate elections priority. While it is impossible to determine if media shapes voting behavior, or if it reflects the norms of the electorate, the influence and power of the news and media outlets remains in their ability to reinforce individuals beliefs, and their ability to help set 'the agenda' by affecting what the public thinks about (Center for Governmental Studies, 2008). With a limited amount of available information sources for initiatives it is difficult to determine or deal with the common concern over voter competence in voting for direct democracy initiatives. If there is not enough easily accessible information available to voters, how can they be expected to make full and complete decisions?

Stephen Nicholson (2003) examined this matter by researching the impact that the political environment has on ballot proposition awareness. Nicholson (2003) pointed out that previous studies on initiatives assessing voter competence presume a basic awareness level for ballot propositions from voters. The studies continue to do this, despite the fact

that little research has been conducted on why or how certain initiatives gain wider attention than others.

Nicholson (2003) focused on the idea of political environment, which encompasses the previously studied individual factors that make up political awareness—education, political party affiliation, sources of information etc, as well as the often-overlooked environmental factors. Nicholson (2003) conducted his research using data from California elections between 1956 and 2000 looking at proximity to election, type of election, campaign spending, media coverage, if the initiative concerns a moral value or civil rights issue, as well as voter fatigue or roll off. Nicholson (2003) found that media attention and campaign spending both have significant positive effects on voter awareness. His research found that newspaper coverage of initiatives increased voter awareness by an average of 16 percentage points, and campaign spending increased awareness by an average of 6 percentage points (Nicholson, 2003).

Nicholson's (2003) study suggests that it is not just the individual factors that impact awareness of initiatives for voters but also factors related to the overall political environment that play a significant role. Awareness does not equate to knowledge, however, by examining the factors that increase and drive awareness for ballot initiatives research gets closer at obtaining the information needed to determine what goes into obtaining the drive, desire and skills to learn and obtain competency or knowledge on specific issues (Nicholson, 2003).

Mark Smith (2001) conducted research on the issue of salience and the contingent effects of ballot initiatives on voter turnout in comparison to candidate races. Smith used

the theoretical framework provided by rational choice theory of turnout that an individual's decision to vote depends on the overall benefits and costs. Smith (2001) explained that the most salient initiatives for voters will be ones individuals know the most about before it appears on the ballot. This base of information means that voters will have an easier time determining the difference between voting 'yes, or 'no' on the issue since they are more familiar and comfortable with the topic and therefore will have the greatest impact on their utility for voting. This is similar to the ideas presented by Bowler and Donovan (1998) about status quo voting. Smith (2001) defined highly salient issues as those that receive and attract greater media attention. His hypothesis was that highly salient initiatives will increase turnout due to a lower overall cost to voters in finding information and forming opinions because turnout has a positive relationship with the salience of initiatives.

Smith (2001) utilized national data from all statewide propositions in general elections from 1972 to 1996 that reached a ballot including initiatives and referenda. To determine the salience of initiatives, Smith (2001) determined the volume of coverage in the news by calculating the number of paragraphs discussing the results of the initiatives and referendum from the previous day's election, and then divided by the total number of paragraphs on the front page of the newspaper, weighting each newspaper's contribution by circulation. Smith (2001) found that the three states with the highest average salience in general elections were Oregon, Colorado and California, these are also the three widely recognized national leaders of the initiative process. Overall Smith (2001) found that when correlated to state voter turnout highly salient initiatives and referenda lead to

large increases in turnout for midterm elections, while average salience initiatives had smaller increases. Smith (2001) ultimately found that unlike past research there is a connection between turnout and initiatives but the effect is only substantial when the initiatives are prominently and widely discussed.

Summary

Initiatives have been studied consistently since the adoption of the process in The United States. Since initiatives involve many complex and involved layers of government, it is important to understand voting behavior as well as the underlying motivation for individuals to participate in or express interest in these often overlooked areas. Previous research has done a good job of examining various aspects of the initiative process, attitudes towards direct democracy, and the complications to the success of initiative processes through the readability and accessibility of information. Yet there is still much to learn, especially about the role of the media in initiative contests.

We know that California utilizes the initiative system at a higher rate than other states that allow for the initiative and referendum process. Previous research has found that Californians are generally in support of direct democracy like the initiative process, though they also feel change is needed to make the process, as well as individual measures less confusing. We also know that voters are not always able to find a complete snapshot of what issues will be on upcoming ballots, and information they do find can be hard to understand, or may not help voters decide how to vote on a particular issue. Previous research has also found that while media does cover initiatives during elections

this coverage is by no means equal. The initiative system encompasses areas that are nearly impossible to fully research and control, as there are numerous outside influences that can impact interest, coverage, voter turnout, and even the events and activities taking place outside of the government and election process. However, it is this exact reason why continual study of the initiative system and process is necessary.

The goal of this thesis is to continue to expand the research on initiatives. Since we know that media coverage of initiatives is not equal, it is important to examine *what* types of initiatives receive greater media attention than others. And we need to know what the impact of specific difference in types of coverage may have on the larger political environment in California. The next chapter presents the methodology for my thesis examining the question of whether certain subjects of initiatives receive greater media attention than others in California.

Chapter Three

METHODOLOGY

For my thesis I used data from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) and the California Secretary of State website to gather information on California voter initiatives from 2000-2014. These data helped me assess my research question: do certain subjects of initiatives receive greater media attention? The data collected by the NCSL comes from the Secretary of State's report of qualifying ballot initiatives for each election year. However, unlike the Secretary of State website the NCSL has created a database of initiatives by election year which was easier to search than the combined data from the Secretary of State's website. In order to ensure an accurate reflection of ballot initiatives in California the information obtained from the NCSL database was cross-referenced with information from the Secretary of State Elections Division's reports on ballot initiatives to ensure no initiative was overlooked. The following chapter will describe in detail the dataset, and the methodology used in my analysis.

National Conference of State Legislature Database of Initiatives

The NCSL gathers data from all 50 states regarding ballot initiatives during election years, this dataset updates within 24 hours of the official reports from state's Secretary of State or other formal reporting offices following elections (NCSL). The NCSL is a public resource, and dataset for issues involving civic engagement, as well as other state specific issues. For the purposes of my thesis information about ballot initiatives in California from 2000-2014 was obtained. California is the focus of this thesis due to California's unique and strong history and use of the initiative system.

California is one of the two states that utilize the initiative system the most, nationally, and have over the course of 105 years California has improved, and increased their use of the initiative system (Simmons, 1997).

The NCSL database allows searches on a state by state basis, and provides the ability to restrict search results to specific election years, election types, and types of ballot initiatives. California allows ballot initiatives to be placed on the ballot by voters-- otherwise called citizen initiatives, as well as the legislature, it is important to be able to distinguish these types of ballot measures. For the purposes of my thesis information was gathered only about initiatives placed on the ballot by citizens. In order to obtain a wide range of data on California initiatives, the information collected from NCSL included citizen initiatives from 2000 to 2014. Table 3.1 shows the information collected from the NCSL database by proposition number, and year.

Table 3.1 NCSL Data

Proposition #	Year	Pass/Fail	Subject
36	2000	Pass	Criminal Justice
37	2000	Fail	Legislature Tax
35	2000	Pass	Labor & Employment
39	2000	Pass	Education
38	2000	Fail	Education
49	2002	Pass	Education
52	2002	Fail	Elections
51	2002	Fail	Transportation Tax
50	2002	Pass	Natural Resources
61	2004	Pass	Health
69	2004	Pass	Criminal Justice
62	2004	Fail	Elections
67	2004	Fail	Tax
66	2004	Fail	Criminal Justice
64	2004	Pass	Law
65	2004	Fail	Tax
63	2004	Pass	Health
71	2004	Pass	Health
68	2004	Fail	Gambling
70	2004	Fail	Gambling
78	2005	Fail	Health
80	2005	Fail	Energy Utilities
79	2005	Fail	Health
75	2005	Fail	Labor Employment
74	2005	Fail	Education
77	2005	Fail	Redistricting
76	2005	Fail	Education
73	2005	Fail	Health
87	2006	Fail	Tax
88	2006	Fail	Tax
90	2006	Fail	Land Use
89	2006	Fail	Taxes
83	2006	Pass	Criminal Justice
86	2006	Fail	Tax
85	2006	Fail	Health
84	2006	Pass	Utilities

Table 3.1 NCSL Data Continued

Proposition #	Year	Pass/Fail	Keyword
10	2008	Fail	Energy
3	2008	Pass	Health
9	2008	Pass	Criminal Justice
8	2008	Pass	Civil Constitutional Law
5	2008	Fail	Criminal Justice
6	2008	Fail	Criminal Justice
11	2008	Pass	Redistricting
7	2008	Fail	Energy Utilities
2	2008	Pass	Animal rights
19	2010	Fail	Marijuana
25	2010	Pass	Legislature
27	2010	Fail	Redistricting
21	2010	Fail	Taxes
22	2010	Pass	Legislature
20	2010	Pass	Redistricting
24	2010	Fail	Business
26	2010	Pass	Legislature
23	2010	Fail	Business
33	2012	Fail	Insurance
34	2012	Fail	Criminal Justice
37	2012	Fail	Business
35	2012	Pass	Criminal Justice
32	2012	Fail	Ethics Lobbying
31	2012	Fail	Legislature
38	2012	Fail	Education Tax
39	2012	Pass	Business Tax
36	2012	Pass	Criminal Justice
45	2014	Fail	Health
47	2014	Pass	Criminal Justice
46	2014	Fail	Health

Lexis-Nexis Academic

For the purposes of this thesis media attention was operationalized to mean number and length of newspaper articles appearing across California newspapers. In order to obtain this information the Lexis-Nexis Academic search database was utilized. Lexis-Nexis provides a complete record of newspaper articles, with the ability to search

by year, subject, and/or keyword. Utilizing Lexis-Nexis and all 67 citizen initiatives collected from the NCSL database, I searched by year and proposition number for each proposition, limiting the findings to California newspapers only. I entered information from these searches into an Excel spreadsheet including newspaper name, publication date, author, number of words, and the number of paragraphs. At the end of the search I utilized excel formulas to calculate the total number of articles appearing for the specific initiative across newspapers, as well as the totals for paragraphs and words. Lexis-Nexis includes a word count with each article in its database, making this a simple statistic to gather for my thesis. However, when articles discussed numerous different initiatives within the same article, or the initiative in my dataset was referenced in only a small section, I broke down the word count to include only the words that specifically referenced the initiative in question. To do this, I copied and pasted the relevant paragraphs after searching the article for the proposition and information explaining it and pasted the content into a word document to count the words accurately. In order to determine how many paragraphs were in each article I counted the paragraphs in each of the articles. In order to remain consistent in the counting of paragraphs across different formatting of newspapers articles, for the purposes of this thesis I defined a paragraph as any break in the article. A break can be as little as one sentence, or in some cases one word or two in a single line.

A complete table of the information collected from Lexis-Nexis can be found in the appendix.

Selection of Initiatives

There is a significant difference between citizen initiatives and ballot measures placed by the legislature. While citizen initiatives can be highly controversial, measures placed on the ballot by the legislature are less controversial, and typically pass. These legislature measures also tend to fall in the same categories year after year, which given their propensity to pass, would bias my findings when combined with citizen initiatives. While both citizen initiatives and legislative measures receive the same broad heading of propositions on the ballot, the similarities end there. Including legislative ballot measures in my analysis of citizen initiatives would essentially be comparing apples and oranges. For this same reason citizen sponsored popular referenda, or citizens attempt to overturn laws passed in the legislature, were also avoided. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the potential differences in media coverage for different subjects of initiatives, and by focusing only on citizen initiatives, I am able to get a clearer picture of what subjects of initiative receive greater media attention.

Once the decision was made to limit the data set to citizen initiatives in California only, a specified date range needed to be selected. The decision to select from 2000-2014 was in an attempt to gain a large dataset, as well as to limit the outside influences and changes to the initiative system that took place in the 1990s. The 2000-2014 period of time represents a fairly stable and consistent time in terms of regulations and rules to initiatives regarding when they could appear on the ballot. The only exception to this is in 2011 State Senate bill 202 which limited initiatives to November elections, and prohibited them from appearing on primary or special elections due to historically low

voter turnout for these smaller elections (Ballotpedia,2011). In order to mitigate this potential data collection issue, initiatives from special elections and primary election were removed from the initial dataset making the total number of ballot measures used for this thesis 67.

Categorizing Initiatives

Since the goal of this thesis was to determine if certain subjects of initiatives received greater media attention than others, it is important to remain consistent in how each initiative was categorized. When gathering the initial list of initiatives from 2000-2014 the NCSL database listed keywords next to each initiative to ease the process of searching through the massive database. However, different initiatives had varying amounts of keywords to help single them out. For instance, some initiatives related to the criminal justice system were labelled simply as “criminal justice”, while others specifically denote the contribution of alcohol or drugs into the criminal justice proposition. For the purpose of this thesis, seven broad categories were used to encompass all of the initiatives in the NCSL dataset and allow for comparisons. The seven categories are: Taxes, Education, Criminal Justice, Utilities, Social Issues, Health, and General Government Reform.

After placing the 67 ballot measures into categories two areas of concern arose. The first was that Proposition 8 from 2008. Originally, Proposition 8 was placed into the Social Issues category, but it had such a large number of articles, paragraphs, and words written about it that it completely skewed the categories results. In order to mitigate this issue I separated Proposition 8 into its own category. The second concern was in the

General Government Reform category. After determining what ballot measures fit in the category, I discovered that five of the measures dealt more with regulations and changes to the business world—engineering and contracting, than general government changes. In order to expand possible explanations and analysis for all categories another category was created denoting Business changes. These changes are reflected in Table 3.2, which shows the breakdown of ballot measures for each of the nine categories.

Table 3.2 Categories of Analysis

	Taxes	Ed	Crim. Justice	Utilities	Social Issues	Prop 8	Health	Gov Reform	Business
	37 (2000)	39 (2000)	36 (2000)	50 (2002)	68 (2004)	8 (2008)	61 (2004)	52 (2002)	35 (2000)
	51 (2002)	38 (2000)	69 (2004)	80 (2005)	70 (2004)		71 (2004)	62 (2004)	64 (2004)
	67 (2004)	49 (2002)	66 (2004)	84 (2006)	73 (2005)		78 (2005)	77 (2005)	75 (2005)
	65 (2004)	74 (2005)	9 (2008)	10 (2008)	83 (2006)		79 (2005)	90 (2006)	24 (2010)
	63 (2004)	76 (2005)	5 (2008)	7 (2008)	85 (2006)		3 (2008)	11 (2008)	33 (2012)
	87 (2006)		6 (2008)	23 (2010)	2 (2008)		45 (2014)	25 (2010)	
	88 (2006)		35 (2012)		4 (2008)		46 (2014)	27 (2010)	
	89 (2006)		36 (2012)		19 (2010)			22 (2010)	
	86 (2006)		47 (2014)		34 (2012)			20 (2010)	
	21 (2010)							26 (2010)	
	39 (2012)							37 (2012)	
	38 (2012)							32 (2012)	
								31 (2012)	
Total	12	5	9	6	9	1	7	13	5

Source: NCSL

Since there is likely some crossover between initiatives subject matter and these broader categories, for the purpose of simplification, any initiative dealing with a tax—either imposing, changing, renewing, increasing or decreasing a tax-- on any topic, was placed into the category of “taxes”. Similarly the “criminal justice” category encompasses any proposition related to crime, prisons, police and law enforcement regulations as well as parole and rehabilitation issues. “Utilities” encompasses any proposition dealing with electricity, gas, and other related environmental issues. The “social issues” category was used to encompass any proposition related to defining marriage, as well as issues related to abortion and imposing new abortion restrictions. The “general government” reform category was defined to encompass the random small government changes proposed in initiatives that did not fit into any of the other categories. For instance, that category included any initiative related to redistricting, term limits, and other proposals to limit or influence general government practices. These nine categories were singled out in an effort to make analysis across broad subjects easier to explain. While this decision may limit or conflate findings, any apparent conflicts or outside influences in the findings have been noted, and explained in Chapter 4.

Description of Analysis

To analyze the data collected from Lexis-Nexis I utilized cross-tabulation to gather information about individual initiatives, election years, as well as the nine subject based categories. In order to accomplish this I copied the total article, paragraph and word counts for each individual initiative, and placed it into a table organized by the nine categories outlined above. The results of this are shown in Appendix A. This information

was combined to create a new total amount for each category based off the numbers from the individual ballot measures within each category. These total numbers for each category were then analyzed against each other to determine if any particular category of ballot measures received greater media attention than others between 2000-2014.

Analysis was also completed using cross tabulation for each individual election year to determine any trends such as increases, or decreases in media attention. The results of these analyses can be found in Chapter four.

Summary

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the amount of media attention given to 67 citizen initiatives in California between 2000-2014. My main research question is determining how much media attention individual initiatives received, as well as assessing if any particular broad subject of initiative receives greater media representation than others. In order to obtain the information necessary to conduct this study I used the NCSL database to gather information and cross-referenced the data with The Secretary of State report on initiatives. In order to examine how much media attention different subjects of initiatives received nine broad categories were used to combine initiatives across different election years. These nine categories are Tax, Education, Health, Criminal Justice, Utility, Social Issues, Proposition 8, Business and General Government Reform. I determine the total number of articles, words, and paragraphs for individual initiatives in the dataset as well as a combined total for each of the nine categories. The results of this analysis are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Four

ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the results from the cross tabulations of the data collected from Lexis-Nexis on media attention and ballot measures. I have divided the analysis into three parts. The first portion focuses on the analysis of the nine broad subject categories that encompass initiatives from the entire data set, 2000-2014. The second focuses on individual initiatives from the data set grouped by election year. The third section evaluates the individual initiatives that passed from the data set.

The purpose of this thesis was to determine if any particular subject of initiative received greater media attention than others. The following chapter attempts to unfold the story of media attention and ballot measures in California as it relates to the 67 initiatives in this dataset. The first section focuses on the main goal of this thesis, and examines the initiatives in their subject categories. After finding that there was no significant difference between the media coverage for each category, I moved to the next layer, the election year in which the initiative was on the ballot. Following this section is an analysis of individual ballot measures based on whether they passed or failed. The last section is a discussion of the implications of these analyses, as well as consideration of important political and social environment context.

Subject and Category Analysis

The primary purpose of this thesis was to determine if any particular subject matter of initiatives received greater media attention than others across election years. In order to conduct this analysis I assigned the 67 propositions into one of nine subject based categories. The detailed results of this categorization can be viewed in Appendix

A. The total article, paragraph and word count for each category as well as their averages is presented in Table 4.1. While the main hypothesis for this thesis is a bit vague—whether any category gets more media attention than others, I expected to find a few hot topics to take the majority of the attention like education or even criminal justice issues.

Table 4.1 Category Totals

	Taxes	Education	Criminal Justice	Utilities	Social Issues	Prop 8	Health	Gov Reform	Business
Articles	337	272	204	167	305	223	233	431	150
Paragraphs	4504	3692	2748	2113	4226	2768	2722	5266	1776
Words	180,813	140,651	107,268	85,386	167,628	110,464	105,208	217,931	73,004
Propositions	12	5	9	6	9	1	7	13	5
Average Articles per Proposition	28	54	23	28	34	n/a	33	33	30
Average Paragraphs per Proposition	375	738	305	352	469	n/a	389	405	355
Average Words per Proposition	15,068	28,130	11,919	14,231	18,625	n/a	15,030	16,764	14,601

As shown in Table 4.1, the category that received the highest overall media coverage appears to be the Government reform category. However, the differences across the categories for media attention are not that substantial, and more importantly it is harder to draw information about what if anything these slight differences may mean. While it is surprising to find that in my data set the government reform and tax categories had the highest total article counts, this does not mean that these are the areas of initiatives that either California voters want to hear more about, or that media have made a conscious effort to devote more media attention to. It could just be that since these categories also received the highest total amount of propositions, these were the issues that the media gave attention to.

Prior to performing this study, I expected to find education, or even criminal justice to ring in at the top of all media attention. I did not expect that the differences between all nine of the categories would be as close as they were. When I first calculated the category totals I thought I had made a mistake as many of the numbers seemed too close to be correct, especially given the wide variety of total proposition numbers in each category. Since there was no stark difference in total media attention, further analysis was required, so I utilized a basic math principle—averages.

To further examine the implications of the media attention given to ballot measures, Table 4.1 also includes information about the average total articles, words and paragraphs for each proposition within each category. I calculated the averages for each category in order to derive more meaningful understanding of what the media attention broke down to for propositions within each of the categories. What is curious about this information is that it provides a different, and in some ways more in line with what I expected, picture of what media attention is like for ballot measures. For instance when looking at the averages for each category's total article count, government reform and taxes are no longer number 1 and 2 respectively, but instead education and social issues have taken their places. This is especially telling for the category of education since the 5 propositions within the category received 20 more average articles, around 200 more average paragraphs and almost 10,000 more words than the other categories—with the exception of the Proposition 8 outlier. Despite this different story, the differences between the categories remained very close.

In order to discern if there was any meaningful finding I performed a basic statistical analysis to test for significance. Using the information in Table 4.1, I calculated the average total articles for the entire data set—34.65, and determined that the standard deviation was 23.212. Based on this information I performed a t-test to assess if there was any statistical significance between the highest total average articles category—Education, and the lowest—Criminal Justice. The results of this t-test found that despite the seemingly dramatic difference between the two categories' average articles per proposition, at a confidence level of 95% that difference was not significant. This information further supports the analysis that while there are some differences between the categories totals, they are not statistically significant. Thus meaning that overall the total media attention for these nine categories was about the same with the exception of Proposition 8. The purpose of this thesis was to determine if there was any difference between media attention to different categories of ballot measures. The answer it appears is no, there is not a significant difference in media attention. However, despite the lack of statistical significance for categorical findings the fact that individual measures, like Proposition 8 were able to obtain high levels of media attention means there is still more to the story.

Individual Election Year Analysis

I collected data from Lexis-Nexis on 67 citizen initiatives in California from 2000-2014. The information I collected referenced how many articles were published about each individual initiative, how many paragraphs were in each of those articles, and how many words. Table 4.2 summarizes the information by the election year. Since no

significant findings were made when analyzing the propositions by category the following section analyzes the initiatives on an individual basis first by election year, and then by the initiatives that passed, and followed by the individual measures amount of media attention they received.

Table 4.2 Data Findings by Year

Year	Total Propositions	Total Articles	Total Paragraphs	Total Words	Avg Articles Per Proposition
2000	5	149	2,299	86,171	29.8
2002	4	70	1,159	42,740	17.5
2004	11	418	4,889	187,677	38
2005	8	452	5,539	221,438	56.5
2006	8	291	4,093	163,219	36.38
2008	10	437	5,057	214,105	43.7
2010	9	241	3,181	134,290	26.78
2012	9	209	2,524	108,743	23.22
2014	3	55	828	33,957	18.33
Total	67	2,322	29,569	1,192,340	34.65

Based on the information in Table 4.2 it appears that the year with the most articles, paragraphs and words on citizen initiatives was 2005 with 452 articles, 5,539 paragraphs and 221,438 words. The 2005 election also had the highest average articles per proposition. The 2005 California election is the only special election included in this data set. Despite being a special election, the election was held at the request of Governor Schwarzenegger in order to move forward his “Reform Agenda”. Unlike other special elections called for in the recent history of California the 2005 election was a statewide election, held in November immediately following a general election year and had an overall state voter turnout rate of 50.4% (Secretary of State, 2005). This election featured

eight initiatives, all of which failed, and the 2005 special election was also the most expensive special election in California state history (Tanner, 2005). Given the amount of money spent by Governor Schwarzenegger on advertising, and marketing events to bolster California participation in the 2005 special election the fact that it comes out on top for article, paragraph, and word counts is not surprising.

While the 2005 special election is somewhat of an outlier, its lead in terms of media coverage is relatively small. The second highest year in terms of media attention was 2008, which has a mere 15 less articles than 2005, 482 fewer paragraphs and 7,333 less words than the 2005 special election's totals (see Table 4.1). The 2008 election also had two more initiatives than the 2005 election. The 2005 special election was left in the dataset because of its similarities to findings of media attention in other years, and since the media attention was bolstered by Governor Schwarzenegger it serves as a sort of 'benchmark' for other years to work towards. This makes the 2005 election a unique comparative tool for further analysis. For instance the 2006 election had the same amount of initiatives on the ballot—8. However, measures from the 2006 election had 161 fewer articles, 1,446 fewer paragraphs, and 52,219 fewer words. Unlike the 2005 special election two of the measures from 2006 passed. While no two election years are identical, the fact that these two elections took place under the same Governor, and within one year of each other, means they have slightly more in common than is the case with measures considered in other years.

The second highest year in terms of media attention was 2008. From a national standpoint the fact that 2008 comes out second highest makes sense given the huge

amount of media attention that election cycle received from the Presidential election.

While it may seem logical that attention to ballot initiatives is stimulated by a presidential election, this is not always the case. For instance in the 2004 election many of the news articles referenced the fact that since California was already ‘pre-determined’ to vote for John Kerry in the presidential election the voting public could focus the entirety of their media efforts towards the 11 ballot measures.

I investigated the details of 2008 having the second highest media attention, and found that of the year’s 214,105 words 103,641 of those words were from Proposition 8. Similarly out of the 5,057 paragraphs for 2008, Proposition 8 received 2,768 of them, and 223 of the total 437 articles. Thus if one separates Proposition 8 from the data for 2008 the remaining totals would be 214 articles, 2,289 paragraphs, and 103,641 words—this is about the same amount of media attention as was afforded all of the nine propositions from 2012.

One of the most compelling and shocking findings from this research was that 2014 had the lowest overall media attention for its three ballot measures, despite the fact that it included Proposition 47 which had a potentially major impact on the criminal justice system. Proposition 47 reduced the penalties for certain nonserious and nonviolent property and drug crimes from a felony to a misdemeanor (Ballotpedia, 2014). Despite the dramatic implications of this proposition, during the election cycle Proposition 47 only had fifteen articles, with 223 paragraphs and a total of 9,498 words written about it between January of 2014 and the day of the election in November. Yet despite the lack of

media attention during the election cycle Proposition 47 did receive attention from people within the policy community.

While each election year had different political environments, different campaign issues, and different overall media attention there is one thread that seems to remain the same. In each election cycle a few specific ballot measures seemed to experience the majority of the media attention. The next logical area to examine is then whether these measures that received more media attention passed, or failed on Election Day.

Passing and Failing Initiatives

Out of the 67 initiatives analyzed in this thesis it is important to note that only 25 of them, roughly 37%, passed. Historically California voters only approve around 40% of all ballot measures that make it onto the ballot, so the fact that only 37% of the measures analyzed for this thesis passed is not surprising (SOS, 2015). In some years—like 2005—every initiative on the ballot failed. In 2014 the only proposition to pass was also the proposition that received the least amount of media attention—Proposition 47. While the lack of media attention is not definitively the cause for the passing of Proposition 47 it is something to consider.

To more precisely determine if there was a connection between media attention and initiative passage, I went back through my data to look at the 25 initiatives that passed from my data set to determine if they too had the lowest or lower media attention compared to their counterparts on the ballot. This information has been condensed into Table 4.3. With a few exceptions—Proposition 8 and Proposition 71, the majority of the passing initiatives hovered in the same range of total articles, words and paragraphs. The

two outliers were: 1) Proposition 8 which had a high enough article, paragraph and word count to qualify as an entire year of media attention, surpassing the amount of coverage offered all initiatives in certain election years; and 2) Proposition 71 from 2004 which had 87 total articles, and which dealt with the issuing of additional funding for stem cell research. Due to the controversial nature of the stem cell topic the majority of the articles written about it were letters to the editor and comments from voters regarding the ethics and religious implications of stem cell research. Proposition 8 also contained highly controversial language regarding the legality of same-sex marriages, and this led to multiple articles and letters to the editor inciting comments about religious implications, and on the other side the broader civil rights implications. Both of these initiatives dealt with highly controversial issues related to individuals personal beliefs, traditions, and views. This controversy drew additional media attention and helped to maintain the level of media attention throughout the election year.

Table 4.3 Passing Ballot Measures 2000-2014

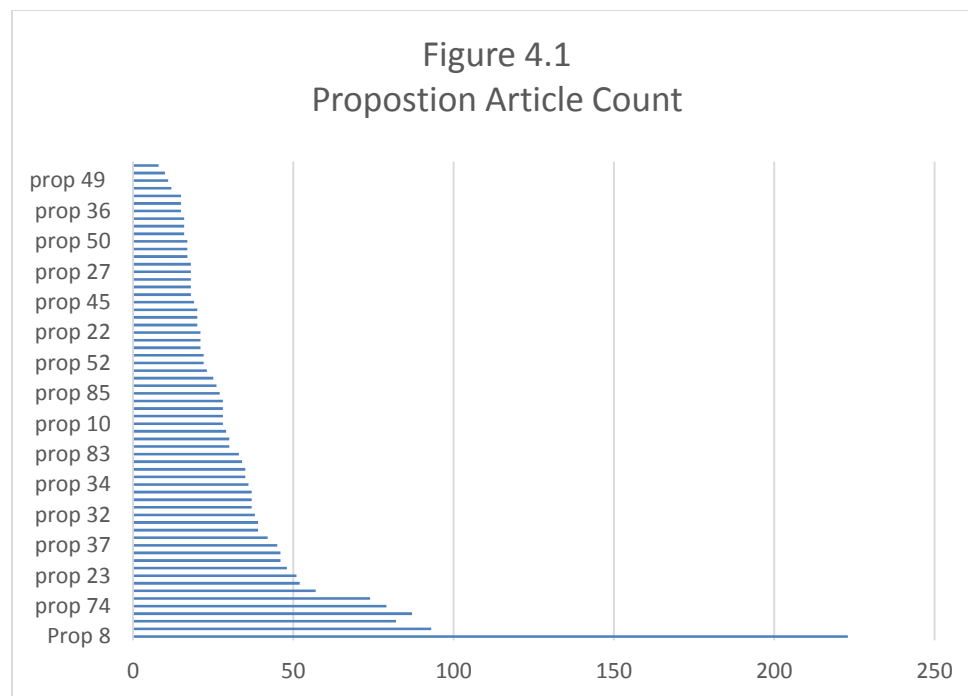
Proposition #	Year	Articles	Paragraphs	Words
47	2014	15	223	9498
36	2012	15	210	9138
39	2012	17	196	8762
35	2012	16	178	7699
26	2010	16	196	9192
20	2010	18	237	10730
22	2010	21	256	10558
25	2010	30	335	15065
2	2008	22	269	10174
11	2008	37	500	21067
8	2008	223	2768	110464
9	2008	18	208	8120
3	2008	20	178	7135
83	2006	33	613	22435
84	2006	30	423	16692
71	2004	87	989	36522
63	2004	39	446	15152
64	2004	37	374	16043
69	2004	20	243	9171
61	2004	18	146	5648
50	2002	17	305	11139
49	2002	11	156	6109
36	2000	23	407	15419
35	2000	8	85	3197
39	2000	15	305	11461

Source: Data taken from Lexis-Nexis

While the propositions shown in Table 4.3 all managed to pass, they did so with varying degrees and amounts of media attention. While Proposition 8 had a total of 223 articles written about it and managed to pass, Proposition 35 from 2000 passed with only 8 total articles written about it. There is no base amount of media attention that determines if a proposition will pass, the fact that Proposition 8 and Proposition 35 both

passed despite a vast difference in media attention means that while media attention may be a factor for some ballot measures, it is not the definitive one for all ballot measures.

Figure 4.1 shows the total articles each individual ballot measure in the data set from 2000-2014 received. The proposition with the highest amount of media attention is Proposition 8 which with 233 total articles beats the second highest total article count by 130 articles. Clearly Proposition 8 is the extreme outlier from the dataset, however, it does follow the general trend that each election cycle one or two hot-button issues receive the bulk of the overall media attention. What is interesting of the top four propositions with the highest article count Proposition 8 from 2008 was a social issue dealing with same-sex marriage, Proposition 38 from 2000 dealt with school vouchers, the third highest Proposition 77 from 2005 was an initiative that would have implemented new redistricting parameters for California, Proposition 71 from 2004 dealt with the controversial issue of stem cell research funding. All four of these initiatives come from different years, and occupy a different category. Proposition 8 dealt with social issues, Proposition 38 was about education options, Proposition 77 dealing with redistricting for California government, and Proposition 71 dealing with the potential health resource of stem cell research. The fact that these four initiatives had the highest overall media attention from their years, does not mean that they were the most important issues for their respective election cycles—but, it does lend to the fact that with the exception of a few outliers each election cycle the media attention for ballot measures is roughly equal.



While it is important to highlight the propositions that received the highest media attention it is also important to acknowledge the ones that receive the lowest. For instance while Proposition 8 was absorbing the brunt of the media attention for ballot measures in 2008 there were nine other measures on the ballot. These measures consist of a bond for children’s hospitals, a bond for alternative fuel vehicles, three criminal justice measures, a measure to redistrict California, a proposition for renewable energy generation, one implementing standards for confining farm animals, as well as a measure implementing a waiting period and parental notification for abortions for minors. While Proposition 8 by far got the most media attention, out of the ten total measures on the ballot in 2008 another four measures—Proposition 2, 11, 9, and 3, did pass. However, as stated earlier historically initiatives in California only pass around 40% of the time, so the important finding from this analysis is not whether the measures passed or failed, but the

implication that within an election cycle with one initiative potentially getting the majority of the attention what does the media attention look like for the other issues on the ballot?

For those initiatives that did not manage to get high levels of media attention, there is a qualitative difference between the media attention they received compared to the attention Proposition 8 received. Proposition 8 and many of the other high media attention propositions attained that high level of attention through a combination of newspaper articles discussing the implications of the proposition as well as letters to the editors and commentary sent in by the California voting public. Proposition 35 from 2000, which had the lowest total media attention from this data set with a total of 8 articles, received media attention that strictly highlighted facts and summarized the proposition. Proposition 35 dealt with the ability for public works projects to use private contractors for engineering work, and that content lends itself to a more analytical summary article than, for example, the social issues or education issues that come up with Proposition 8 or 38. However, the fact that this difference in media exists is important to highlight.

While the difference in media attention was not significant, the fact that the types of articles also tended to differ between categories of initiatives means that for some propositions a lack of media attention could also mean a lack of public commentary from other members of the public. While there is no definitive difference between the types of articles presented for a proposition, if a proposition was given only summary information

during an election cycle, it could lead to the same information that is presented in other media, like the voter information guide simply being repeated across multiple platforms.

Summary

This chapter presented the results of my analysis on whether certain subjects of ballot measures received greater media attention than others. The results of this chapter find that as a whole the media attention given to the nine subjects of Taxes, Education, Criminal Justice, Utilities, Social Issues, Proposition 8, Health, General Government Reform, and Business were not drastically different. On top of this, when assessing the average articles per proposition within categories, the differences between the highest average category and lowest, were found to not be statistically significant. The averages for this data set are important to highlight because they changed the story, and because despite this difference the results were still not significant. While it was surprising to find that the categories received roughly the same amount of media attention, perhaps more surprising was the fact that when examining the type of media attention given to different measures there was a difference.

Ultimately the findings of this thesis are as follows: 1) there is no significant difference in the media attention given to different subjects of initiatives; 2) within each election year a few propositions managed to obtain a large portion of the cycle's media attention; 3) media attention for individual measures does not impact the passage or fail rate for individual measures; and 4) the type of media attention can and does vary for different ballot measures.

While I did not receive support for my original hypothesis that different categories of initiatives would receive higher media attention than other, the results of this analysis of media attention and ballot measures did raise interesting questions. If subject matter is not the most important factor in media attention, perhaps the issue is what type of media attention ballot measures receive—a summation of the facts, or a broad and deep conversation or debate about the issue, and the potential societal implications. While the focus of this study was the analysis of different subjects of initiatives media attention, it is also on a larger scale about the accessibility and availability of information for California voters on the ballot measures that they have been tasked with voting on each election cycle.

In the final chapter I will address the policy and political implications of the complicating factors and political environment behind the results of this study. I will also address limitations of this study as well as any remaining confounding factors, and make suggestions for further analysis and research on this topic.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

California's use of the initiative system is not going away. For instance, the upcoming November 2016 Presidential election in California has the potential to have up to 20 total citizen initiatives on the ballot, and is likely to have at least 15 given the low signature requirements as a result of low voter turnout from the 2014 General Election (Meyer, 2015). Given this, and the fact that future elections are likely to see similar results it is important to continuously update the literature on the initiative system, as well as the individual measures that qualify for the ballot. This thesis attempted to address one of those areas by analyzing the media attention given to individual citizen initiatives from 2000-2014, as well as the potential concern that certain subjects of initiatives received greater media attention than others. In the concluding chapter, I address the findings from my research, as well as address limitations and recommendations for further study.

Summary of Findings

My thesis had four major findings. The first finding was that there is no significant difference in media attention for the nine categories. Initially my hypothesis was that certain subjects of initiatives would receive greater overall media attention than others, specifically I thought that social issues, and education would dominate the media. The fact that all nine of the categories had similar levels of media attention is interesting and disproved my hypothesis. However, this finding led me to dig deeper into the individual election years to see what the picture was on a smaller scale.

The second finding from this thesis was that within each election cycle a few propositions managed to obtain a large portion of the total media attention. While categories did not receive greater overall media attention, I was able to notice a trend that there were a few specific initiatives over the years—Proposition 8 among them, that did receive the majority of the attention for the year that does show that there can be a gap in media attention. Despite insignificant findings, the media does give different attention to particular types of initiatives, they just did not fall neatly into the subject matter categories.

The third finding was that media attention did not impact the ability for an individual measure to pass, or fail. Historically Californians pass ballot measures about 40% of the time, and roughly 37% of the initiatives in my study managed to pass. Some years, such as 2005, saw all ballot measures failing. Others like 2008 saw the bulk of attention go towards a single measure (Proposition 8), but four other measures out of the ten on the ballot also managed to pass. Perhaps more interesting for this finding was the relationship between Proposition 47 from 2014, and its inability to attract media attention, despite being a widely discussed initiative within the policy world.

The fourth finding was that the type of media attention given to ballot measures did vary. The fact that the types of articles tend to also differ when a proposition receives greater media attention is important to notice. While Proposition 8 managed to stir up both commentary and analytical articles, other measures like 38 (which received the lowest overall media attention from the data set) saw only articles written in brief summary form. There is nothing ‘wrong’ with these kinds of articles, but if all eight

articles dedicated to this proposition list the exact same information in almost the same manner without much outside commentary, then the information becomes less appealing and in some cases less understandable for many readers, and is not likely to stimulate much outside conversation.

The goal of this thesis was to identify if any category of ballot measure received greater media attention than others to identify any potential gaps in coverage for California voters. While I found no statistically significant difference between the nine category totals, the fact that the type of media attention did differ between initiatives is the most interesting discovery, as this still hints at the possibility of a gap in the information available to voters.

Limitations

The results of this thesis were limited by several factors. It is important to highlight these limitations so that future research on this topic can accurately deal with and assess how these limitations may influence their own work, and so that the reader can attain a better understanding of the overall analysis and data gathered and used for this thesis.

One of the main limitations was access to complete data on all forms of media in California that may have presented information about individual ballot measures. This thesis relied on information obtained from the Lexis-Nexis database for newspaper articles, because it was easy way to gather data and because previous research on initiatives conducted by Magleby in 1984 found that while newspaper readership was going down overall, an exception was made for obtaining information about ballot

measures. Since newspapers are only one potential news source in today's digital age, it would be beneficial for future studies to attempt to access transcripts of popular radio and television programs that may shed light on ballot initiatives as well as contribute to their overall media attention. It may also be of interest to examine the role and potential use of social media to disseminate information about ballot measures since it has emerged as a relatively new source of information, especially for younger generations.

In a similar fashion, many propositions face legal battles both before placement on the ballot or after, resulting in their removal from the upcoming ballot. While this did contribute to the overall media attention for a few ballot measures in this data set that experienced this, it would be interesting to acknowledge and examine more directly the effects of court cases on media attention, and include these reports into the findings of a future study.

The second biggest limitation for this thesis was simply time. If given even a full year to devote entirely to this topic it is more likely that the initial data set with 89 propositions including all primary elections would have been more feasible to get through. This larger data set would enable a broader range of analysis and implications from the findings. However, as seems to be the case in most research the data collection—no matter what method or planning implemented to mitigate the potential lengthiness, always takes longer than projected. This is the reason why the data for this thesis were limited to the 67 ballot measures placed on general or presidential elections between 2000 and 2014, with the exception of the special election from 2005.

A third limitation was the inconsistency of paragraph demarcations across newspapers, and across the online replication of newspaper articles. When data collection began it became clear that each newspaper, individual article, and to a lesser extent author had different ways of formatting and incorporating paragraph breaks or even line breaks. In an attempt to mitigate this issue, a paragraph was defined for this study as a break, which included anything from an entire sentence, to a few words on a separate line. Given the lack of consistency across sources, the information regarding paragraph totals is less useful as an evaluative tool than the total words, or article numbers. Despite this fact, the information was still included to provide a secondary point of analysis across categories, and election years.

A fourth limitation for this thesis was simply the slightly unexpected magnitude of articles and attention given to Proposition 8. As stressed in chapters three and four, this single initiative had as much media attention as entire years of ballot measures, as well as entire categories. This issue presented itself towards the end of data collection when I was already feeling tired of counting paragraphs and copying and pasting words from other initiatives and worrying about ever finishing the data collection for this project. Given the sheer volume of media attention given to this measure, both before, during and even after its passing, it represents an interesting constraint and outlier from my data. While I made every attempt during the data collection process to limit duplicate or repeat articles across news sources for all measures in this study, if any source or article was duplicated it seems highly likely it would be from this initiative whose data collection took almost three full days to complete.

Another limitation for this study was the categorization of the 67 initiatives in the data set. While it was necessary for my thesis to categorize initiatives in order to discern if any particular category received greater media attention, the categorization was largely arbitrary and is subject to individual critique and preferences. While I made every attempt to be fair and use the same logic to sort the initiatives into the categories, there is a lot of cross over and some of the larger categories like government reform contain initiatives that in many ways have no similarities other than the fact they did not fit into any other category. If I had more time, I would have tried sorting the initiatives in different categories and seeing if that affected the conclusions about differences across subject areas.

The final limitation this study faced was the analytical tool utilized. While many research studies utilize cross-tabulation to gain information from their data, it is not hard to argue that the findings and results from more concrete and specifically defined regression analysis or other more sophisticated tools might lead to more precise findings. While I was able to incorporate a simple t-test into my methodology in an attempt to give a bit more solidity to my findings, it would be interesting to use multiple regression analysis to assess differences in media attention, assuming that there was a way to measure the relevant explanatory variables.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations from my study on citizen initiatives in California the following are areas I encountered during my data collection and analysis that I feel would benefit from further study.

The focus of this thesis was to assess the media attention given to initiatives that qualified for the ballot from 2000-2014, therefore, I was only able to document and briefly assess the implications of the pass and fail rates for some initiatives. Since the overall purpose of initiatives is to change or implement new legislation, or practices, a future study on the pass and fail rates of initiatives in concurrence with the media attention as well as the money spent on the campaigns would be interesting. While my research could not conclusively identify any patterns between the pass and fail rates and media attention, I was able to discern that some of the measures that passed—Proposition 47 in particular, had some of the lowest overall individual media attention. While it is possible that for certain more technical measures individuals are more likely to accept that whoever wrote the initiative is more of a subject based ‘expert’ than they are, research has found that voters are more likely to vote no, or not vote on ballot measures—especially ones they do not understand (Smith, 2001).

My analysis of Proposition 47 has led to the next area for possible further research. Since Proposition 47 managed to pass, and received very little media attention in the year before the election, it is an interesting case study due to its impact on California government and specifically probation departments. While Proposition 47 did not receive much media attention during the election cycle, it is currently discussed by news and media in California very regularly as counties are still working to implement and deal with the aftermath of the downgrading of certain crimes. It seems like there may be other instances of propositions like 47 who failed to achieve much media attention during the election cycle and managed to pass only to achieve much higher levels of

attention upon implementation. It would be interesting to examine this issue specifically to determine if there may be any trends, for instance with initiatives who have had multiple iterations on multiple ballots over the years, like Proposition 47.

This thesis was limited only to California ballot measures and media attention. The saying “as California so goes the nation” provides the context for the next area of future research. California is one of the states with the highest and longest use of the initiative system in The United States. For this reason it would be interesting to include references made to California initiatives outside of the United States to determine how and if that has any impact on the overall attention given to the measure within California as well as any broader implications for the election. In a similar sense it would be interesting given enough time, and resources to conduct a study using national comparisons to see if there are any trends in ballot measures in terms of media attention, and passing rates across states.

My thesis also only utilized secondary data, since there are many other contributing factors that complicate the political landscape and environment it would be interesting to gain the input of experts within this field including politicians, lobbying firms, the Secretary of State and even journalists to see what their perspective on this issue is.

Policy Implications

Based on the four major findings from this thesis the broader policy implications come from the second finding—that within each election cycle a few measures obtain the majority of overall media attention, and the fourth finding that the type of media attention

differs. If social issues like Proposition 8 and other controversial issues, like Proposition 71 from 2004 continue to secure a large portion of media attention each cycle it begs the question how California voters can obtain enough information about other important issues on the ballot. While there are other available sources of information, previous research has brought to light some potential problems with the accessibility, as well as readability of this information for all voters. Given this trend, another potential issue is the reality California has seen with the passage of Proposition 47 from 2014. While it generated very limited media attention during the 2014 election cycle, Proposition 47 passed, and the implementation has led to a massive overhaul of the criminal justice system with a very short amount of time to deal with potential problems. Propositions are supposed to be the people's voice in their government, a way to directly influence and implement policy and changes to society. If a proposition gets on the ballot, and information is not easily found, or if the information largely presents the same information that can be found in other sources it is difficult to start conversations and dialogues about the proposition. Perhaps there are other important measures like Proposition 47 lurking on the ballot.

While it is still the responsibility for the media to disseminate information about election information, it is also the responsibility of voters to make an educated decision and vote on Election Day. Even if the media did a thorough, and as equal as possible representation of ballot measures it would not guarantee that enough voters would take the time to read it. Indicating that training or a stronger focus on civic engagement may also be necessary.

This issue of voters being able to understand and become fully informed is especially pertinent if the other methods of obtaining information for propositions, like the voter information guide, are still written at a grade level too high for a large portion of Californian voters. Since the summary presented in the voter information guide is written by the Attorney General, it is a non-partisan description with the intended purpose to summarize each proposition it is often the summary that gets reproduced by newspapers and other media outlets. If, as was the case with Proposition 38, the only articles available for a proposition simply offer the same summary, and that summary while well intentioned, is still written at a reading level that surpasses some California voters, it is not the best choice for spreading information to the public.

These policy implications suggest that there is a need for some degree of reform or change as it relates to the initiative system in California. Perhaps we need legislation that empowers further scrutiny and further analysis of propositions before Election Day to provide voters with another source of information, and another 'cue' for how to vote. Maybe the role of media, needs to be adapted, given the growth and strength of social media and technology perhaps the important task of disseminating information to the public needs to be adapted to grow and change with the technology and readership. Perhaps, on a deeper scale, the issue is less the role of media, and more the lack of understanding, and 'apathy' of voters about the importance of ballot measures, and their effect on society.

Conclusion

This thesis attempted to address the question of whether any specific category of initiative received greater media attention for the 2000-2014 election cycles. While no significant differences were found between categories media attention, the findings of this thesis do have important implications. Initiatives are a part of almost every California election they can have broad and lasting impacts on day to day life for the general public as well as the government and government agencies. The fact that initiatives are so embedded into Californian culture makes it very difficult to fully discern and address the entire political environment and potential ripple effects they may cause. However, it is this exact embeddedness that makes the examination of the relationships and ‘web’ of initiatives in California all the more pertinent.

My thesis indicates that we need to give more attention to the role of the media in the ballot initiative process. If as this study suggests there is not enough information about important initiatives provided by traditional news outlets, where and how can we expect voters to obtain all of the information necessary to vote?

In order to continue to understand and acknowledge the existence of any trends in the initiative system, and any potential changes to the political landscape of California, it is necessary for research to continue to delve into the complicated, interconnected world of initiatives, as well as the role of media. The aim is to enable us, as a voting public, to better understand the implications, and to enable political leaders, journalists, and the individuals and organizations who draft these ballot measures each year to better understand the potential policy, and societal implications.

For now, initiatives remain the voice of the people, and California's 'fourth' branch of government. Voters still rely on the same main sources of information for initiatives that they have for generations. The question is *should* they do so, or better yet, what exactly needs to change? The results of this study imply that while the overall picture of media attention to ballot measures in California is better than initially predicted, there are still some areas of concern. Major media outlets can still overlook initiatives that have major implications and changes for California, and can continue to give the bulk of their attention to issues like Proposition 8, or 71. Propositions can, and will continue to be passed despite minimal information presented about them in the media. While propositions remain an important part of California government, there has to be a more efficient way of explaining, analyzing, and sharing information about the implications and facts of measures appearing on each ballot.

APPENDIX A
CATEGORY DETERMINATIONS

Health

Proposition #	Articles	Paragraphs	Words
61	18	146	5648
71	87	989	36522
78	29	372	13798
79	39	432	17646
3	20	178	7135
45	19	274	11460
46	21	331	12999
Total:	233	2722	105,208

Business

Proposition #	Articles	Paragraphs	Words
35	8	85	3197
64	37	374	16043
75	82	1047	42575
24	11	141	5804
33	12	129	5379
Total:	150	1,776	73,004

APPENDIX A
CATEGORY DETERMINATIONS

Government Reform

Proposition #	Articles	Paragraphs	Words
52	22	345	13001
62	46	518	19427
77	82	984	40654
90	46	573	21803
11	37	500	21067
25	30	335	15065
27	18	235	10254
22	21	256	10558
20	18	237	10730
26	16	196	9192
37	45	523	21871
32	38	403	18054
31	12	161	6256
Total:	431	5,266	217,931

Proposition 8

Proposition #	Articles	Paragraphs	Words
8	223	2768	110464
Total:	223	2768	110464

APPENDIX A
CATEGORY DETERMINATIONS

Social Issues

Proposition #	Articles	Paragraphs	Words
68	34	490	18425
70	35	454	17392
73	42	562	22420
83	33	613	22435
85	27	284	11890
2	22	269	10174
4	28	324	12602
19	48	741	30644
34	36	489	21646
Total:	305	4226	167628

APPENDIX A
CATEGORY DETERMINATIONS

Utilities

Proposition #	Articles	Paragraphs	Words
50	17	305	11139
80	25	282	12119
84	30	423	16692
10	28	274	11657
7	16	212	8571
23	51	617	25208
Total:	167	2,113	85,386

Education

Proposition #	Articles	Paragraphs	Words
39	15	305	11461
38	93	1371	50855
49	11	156	6109
74	79	884	33386
76	74	976	38840
Total:	272	3692	140651

APPENDIX A
CATEGORY DETERMINATIONS

Criminal Justice

Proposition #	Articles	Paragraphs	Words
36	23	407	15419
69	20	243	9171
66	52	709	28410
9	18	208	8120
5	28	365	15530
6	17	205	8785
35	16	178	7699
36	15	210	9138
47	15	223	9498
Total:	204	2748	107,268

APPENDIX A
CATEGORY DETERMINATIONS

Tax

Proposition #	Articles	Paragraphs	Words
37	10	131	5239
51	20	353	12941
67	21	226	8214
65	29	294	13273
63	39	446	15152
87	57	879	38542
88	26	430	15512
89	37	471	20249
86	35	420	16096
21	28	423	16835
39	17	196	8762
38	18	235	9998
Total:	337	4504	180813

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