Curbing Their Power

Dissatisfaction with institutional performance in a relentlessly individualist polity like ours manifests itself in an embrace of direct democracy devices—initiatives, referendums, term limits, recalls, and direct primaries—designed to curb the power of malperforming institutions.

Question: Whenever Congress has voted to amend the Constitution, should the amendment then be put up to the state legislatures or directly to the people of each state for approval?

Whenever congress has voted to amend the Constitution

1937

Amendment should then be put up to the people for approval

74%

Put up to the state legislatures for approval

No opinion

Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, March 3-8, 1937.

Question: Opponents of referendums and recall elections say people won't be able to cast informed votes and we should trust our elected representatives to make public decisions. Supporters of referendums and recall elections say people are able to cast informed votes and deserve more of a say in government. What is your opinion...?

1987

We should trust our elected officials to make public decisions on all issues

6% Don't know

Voters should have a direct say on some issues

76%


Question: The U.S. Senate will consider a proposal that would require a national vote—that is, a referendum—on an issue when three percent of all voters who voted in the most recent presidential election sign petitions asking for such a nationwide vote. How do you feel about this plan—do you...?

1978

Favor plan for a national vote on an issue when three percent of all voters sign petitions asking for it

57%

Oppose

No opinion

Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, January 6-9, 1978.

Question: In many states and communities if a large number of people sign a petition, citizens can vote to remove an elected official who is unresponsive or doing a poor job. This is called a recall election. Other states and communities do not provide for recall elections, believing such elections lessen the independence of elected officials. What is your opinion—would you...?

1987

Favor changing the Constitution to permit national recall elections for members of Congress

67%

Oppose

6% Don't know


Question: Would you favor or oppose a constitutional amendment to require any federal tax increase be voted on in a national referendum by the general public?

1992

Favor constitutional amendment to require that any federal tax increase be voted on in a national referendum

72%

Oppose

89%


Question: As things stand now, the president and Congress make the laws for the federal government. Some people have proposed that laws also be passed by national referendum, which would mean putting various proposals on the ballot so people across the country could vote them up or down directly. Would you...?

1993

Favor idea of passing federal laws through a national referendum system

65%

Oppose

10% not sure/refused

Source: Survey by the Los Angeles Times, June 12-14, 1993.
Initiatives, Referendums, Recalls

The map below shows the states that use initiative, referendum, and recall devices. Californians, who have voted on a substantial number of statewide propositions in the last decade, are not as enthusiastic about them as they were in the past, but the device still enjoys solid majority support there.


Question: Do you think that statewide ballot proposition elections are a good thing for California, a bad thing, or don’t you think they make much difference?

Respondents in California

Statewide proposition elections are...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>A good thing for California</th>
<th>Neither good nor bad</th>
<th>A bad thing</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td></td>
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<td>2%</td>
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<td>1982</td>
<td>80%</td>
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<td>5%</td>
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<td>1989</td>
<td>73%</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>66%</td>
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<td>3%</td>
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Source: Surveys by the Field Institute, latest that of August 17–27, 1990

Question: Next I am going to read you various statements that have been made concerning proposition races and I would like you to tell me whether you agree or disagree with each one. Do you...

Respondents in California

Initiatives and referendums would allow the public to decide issues where public officials are hesitant to act for fear of offending certain groups

Citizens ought to be able to vote directly on important issues and policies instead of having their representatives voting for them

Since many people do not follow politics regularly, they may not be able to make an informed decision on the issues they would be asked to vote on

The job of making laws should be left to elected representatives. If people don’t like what they do, they can vote them out of office

Source: Survey by the Field Institute, October 1–4, 1982.