

THE EDUCATIVE EFFECTS OF BALLOT INITIATIVES ON VOTER TURNOUT

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Scholars have begun examining what Progressive reformers called the educative effects of direct democracy, especially the effect ballot initiatives have on voter turnout. Research based on aggregate-level voter age population (VAP) turnout data indicates that ballot measures increase turnout in low-information midterm elections but not in presidential elections. We analyze the impact of ballot initiative use on voter turnout from 1980 through 2002 using voter eligible population (VEP) turnout rates. Cross-sectional time-series analysis reveals that (a) ballot initiatives increase turnout in midterm as well as presidential elections and (b) the turnout effect in midterm and especially presidential elections is considerably larger than previously thought. On average, turnout in presidential elections increases by 0.70% with each initiative on the ballot, whereas turnout in midterm elections increases by 1.7%, all else equal. Given the closeness of the Electoral College contests, it is possible that the mobilizing effects of statewide ballot questions could be the determining factor in future presidential elections.

Keywords: direct democracy; ballot initiatives; turnout; progressive reform; education; political awareness

Since California's historic October 2003 recall of former-Governor Gray Davis and simultaneous election of Arnold Schwarzenegger, journalists, scholars, and practitioners have become more attuned to the possible mobilizing effects of the mechanisms of direct democracy. In the recall election—which was triggered by the collection of more than 1.3 million valid signatures and in many ways reflected a ballot proposition campaign whereby voters are asked a policy question, specifically, should Davis be recalled—61% of registered voters turned out to vote. Turnout was higher than normal and topped turnout levels in the previous two gubernatorial elections in 2002 and 1998

(Shelley, 2003a, 2003b). Although any lasting effects of the recall on turnout rates of California's electorate remain to be seen (Kousser, 2004; McDonald, 2003), it is clear that the special election had at least a temporary salutary effect on voter turnout (Barreto & Ramirez, 2004; Bowler & Cain, 2004; Stone & Datta, 2004).

Political observers have also turned their attention on the impressive level of voter turnout in Missouri's August 2004 primary; more than 40% of registered voters cast ballots, the highest primary turnout dating back to at least 1980 (Davey, 2004). Although Missouri voters were confronted with contested Republican and Democratic primaries for governor and U.S. Senate, what clearly drew voters to the polls was a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage that was placed on the ballot by the state legislature. Nearly 39,000 more voters cast ballots on the antigay marriage referendum than for the gubernatorial contest, and close to 137,000 more citizens voted for the ballot measure than for the U.S. Senate race (Blunt, 2004). The considerable attention paid by political pundits to the sizable primary turnout in Missouri in 2004, as well as the increase in voter participation in the 2003 California recall election, reflects the growing awareness that the mechanisms of direct democracy—which most notably include citizen initiatives—may help draw voters to the polls (Jacobson, 2004; Welsh-Huggins, 2004). Given the closeness of the 2000 Electoral College contest, it is possible that the mobilizing effects of statewide ballot questions could be a determining factor in future presidential elections.

Some scholars have begun to critically explore what Progressive reformers referred to as the educative effects of direct democracy (Smith & Tolbert, 2004). Although ballot measure contests unquestionably have had a major impact on public policy in the two dozen states that permit citizen lawmaking (Bowler, Donovan, & Tolbert, 1998; Broder, 2000; Ellis, 2002; Gerber, 1996, 1999; Gerber, Lupia, & McCubbins, 2004; Gerber, Lupia, McCubbins, & Kiewiet, 2001; Lascher, Hagen, & Rochlin, 1996; Schrag, 1998), we argue that the process of direct democracy itself can influence the attitudes and behaviors of individuals. The educative effects of ballot initiatives include enhancing civic engagement (M. Smith, 2002; Tolbert, McNeal, & Smith, 2003), building confidence in government (Bowler & Donovan, 2002; Hero & Tolbert, 2004; Mendelsohn & Cutler,

2000), and mobilizing interest groups and political parties (Boehmke, 2002; Bowler & Donovan, 1998; D. Smith & Tolbert, 2001; Tolbert, McNeal, et al., 2003). Previous studies have found that citizens who are exposed to ballot initiatives have more political knowledge (M. Smith, 2002; Tolbert, McNeal, et al., 2003) and interest in politics (Tolbert, McNeal, et al., 2003), enhanced political efficacy (Bowler & Donovan, 2002; Hero & Tolbert, 2004; Mendelsohn & Cutler, 2000), and are more likely to contribute to citizen interest groups (D. Smith & Tolbert, 2004). Scholars have also found that states with more frequent use of ballot initiatives have more citizen and nonprofit interest groups (Boehmke, 2002; D. Smith & Tolbert, 2004; see also Gerber, 1999).

Chief among these educative effects, however, is the positive effect that direct democracy has on voter turnout (Donovan & Smith, 2004; Lacey, in press; M. Smith, 2001; Tolbert, Grummel, & Smith, 2001; Tolbert, McNeal, et al., 2003). As Putnam (2000) notes, voting is by a “substantial margin the most common form of political activity [by citizens], and it embodies the most fundamental democratic principle of equality” (p. 35). Building on recent research assessing how ballot initiatives may shape the broader democratic landscape in the American states (Bowler & Donovan, 2004a; Mendelsohn & Cutler, 2000; D. Smith & Tolbert, 2004; Tolbert, 2003), and specifically how the process effects the attitudes and behaviors of citizens, we elaborate on this theme by systematically analyzing over time how ballot measures affect voter turnout in the American states. Specifically, we assess the Progressive Era proposition that the use of the initiative in the American states can bolster voter turnout. Using aggregate-level voter eligible population (VEP) turnout data from the 50 states (McDonald & Popkin, 2001), we examine whether states that use the initiative process have higher levels of voter turnout in midterm and presidential elections than states that do not permit the process.

THE INSTRUMENTAL AND EDUCATIVE PURPOSES OF THE INITIATIVE

Direct democracy, which includes the grassroots mechanisms of the recall, the popular referendum, and the citizen initiative grew out

of the doctrines put forth by Populists in the late 19th century. The three citizen lawmaking tools became highly prized by Progressives in the early 1900s as reformers sought new ways to empower otherwise apathetic citizens. Between 1898 and 1918, voters in more than two dozen states approved amendments to add the initiative, popular referendum, or recall to their constitutions (Bowler, Donovan, & Tolbert, 1998; Magleby, 1984). Most of the contagion occurred in the sparsely populated states west of the Mississippi River (Goebel, 2002). In California, progressive Governor Hiram Johnson, first elected in 1910, led the charge for the adoption of direct democracy (Piott, 2003). In a special election on October 10, 1911, 76% of Californians voted in favor of the legislative referendum that amended the state's constitution to include the initiative, referendum, and recall (Allswang, 2000). Although much of the argument for the adoption of direct democracy in California and other states focused on the substantive changes the mechanisms would foster, some Progressives also envisioned direct democracy inspiring and educating the masses (Mattson, 1998; Tolbert, 2003; but see Hofstadter, 1955). The placing of policy measures on the ballot, some reformers argued, would help bolster the level of civic participation of what even in 1911 was an increasingly disengaged citizenry.

Since the early 20th century, practitioners and scholars of direct democracy have noted the instrumental and educative justifications of the institutional mechanism (D. Smith & Tolbert, 2004). Today, the instrumental goal of the initiative is often highlighted in scholarly and journalistic studies. The instrumental purpose of the initiative is clearly stipulated in the constitutions of the states permitting the process. The mechanism is first and foremost intended to provide citizens with an institutional check on the system of representative governance. From this perspective, the initiative can empower citizens to initiate and approve substantive laws and constitutional amendments, circumventing the state legislature. Citizens in 24 states have the authority to make or alter public policy independent of their elected legislative bodies.

The underlying premise of the instrumental function of the initiative is that it can help prevent state legislatures from becoming unrepresentative. In an even-handed assessment of the mechanism during

the Progressive Era, Harvard political scientist William Munro (1912) observed, "The first argument in favor of direct legislation rests, accordingly, upon the allegation that existing legislative methods and results are unsatisfactory to the majority of the electorate; that representatives do not properly represent" (p. 20). Substantive issues either ignored or thwarted by elected representatives may be introduced by interested citizens or groups functioning outside the traditional legislative process. Although scholars continue to debate whether the primary function of the initiative—that it allows the popular will to check the power of state governments and elected officials by enabling citizens to enact public policy—is effective (Camobreco, 1998; Donovan, Bowler, McCuan, & Fernandez, 1998; Gerber, 1996, 1999; Gerber, Lupia, & McCubbins, 2004; Lascher et al., 1996; Matsusaka, 1995, 2001; D. Smith, 2001, 2003), the instrumental purpose of the initiative tells only one half the story.

A second rationale for the adoption and use of the initiative is a procedural by-product of its instrumental function. In addition to any substantive changes in public policy it may exact, some Progressives argued that the initiative process itself could be educational. Although much has been made of efforts by some middle- and upper-class reformers to exert social control and consolidate power during the Progressive Era by systematically disempowering certain groups (ethnic urban immigrants, corporate interests, and party bosses, to name a few) in the name of democratizing political reforms, such as at-large elections (Hofstadter, 1955; Lasch, 1965; McDonagh, 1992; Tolbert, 2003), other reformers had a more optimistic view of the potentials for self-government (Allswang, 2000; Mattson, 1998). Many reformers understood citizen lawmaking to be a pedagogical process and touted the educative values of the initiative. Writing in 1912, Munro observed,

Emphasis is laid, for example, upon the educative value of direct legislation. By means of the initiative, a spirit of legislative enterprise is promoted among the voters; men are encouraged to formulate political ideas of their own and to press these upon public attention with the assurance that they shall have a fair hearing. If the welfare often suffers from public apathy; if the mass of the voters manifest little interest in the contents of the statute-book, this is due in large measure, it is

claimed, to the feeling of electoral helplessness which in some states amounts to a popular conviction. (pp. 20-21)

During the most formative period of initiative adoption and usage, Progressive reformers such as University of Wisconsin–Madison Professor Paul Reinsch (1912) stated with confidence, “This institution [direct legislation] will assist the people, the body of the electorate, in the development of its political consciousness,” as “it will make the body of the electorate more familiar with legislative programs and more interested” (p. 158). Politicians too saw the educative value of direct democracy. Hiram Johnson (1911), the reformist Republican governor of California, asked rhetorically in his inaugural address, “How best can we arm the people to protect themselves hereafter?” He responded, “The first step in our design to preserve and perpetuate popular government shall be the adoption of the initiative, the referendum, and the recall,” (Johnson, 1911) as “the first duty that is mine to perform is to eliminate every private interest from the government, and to make the public service of the State responsive solely to the people.” Even Woodrow Wilson, who in 1898 had harshly criticized direct legislation as it was then being practiced in Switzerland, by the time of his bid for the presidency in 1912 had convinced himself of the virtues of a “populistic conception of democracy” (Hofstadter, 1955, p. 262). Wilson argued how the initiative could “cut down the jungle in which corruption lurks” and might help to “drag things into the light, break down private understandings and force them to be public understandings” (as cited in Hammell, 1911, p. 284). Irrespective, then, of any substantive policy changes that might result from the mechanism, many Progressives argued that popular votes on policy issues could have a pronounced educative effect on citizens.

Despite the recognition of the secondary, procedural effects of the process during the Progressive Era, few contemporary scholars have examined the educative effects of the initiative and their repercussions for democracy in the American states. Our objective, then, is to critically examine one of the potential positive benefits of the initiative process—namely, its indirect effect on voter turnout, in midterm and presidential elections.

THE EFFECTS OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY ON VOTER TURNOUT

Following the strong-party era during the Gilded Age, when levels of voting participation reached historic heights, turnout began dropping precipitously at the start of the 20th century. During what political historians alternatively refer to as the Fourth Party system or the postparty era, voter turnout outside the one-party, Democratic-dominated South fell by nearly 15% in presidential elections between 1896 and 1916. Structural barriers to participation—such as the abolition of party-line voting; party registration laws; the prohibition of fusion (listing candidates under multiple-party labels); literacy tests; poll taxes; and the desynchronization of local, state, and national elections—were frequently blamed for the waning rates of voter turnout (Burnham, 1982; Kleppner, 1987; Kornbluh, 2000; Kousser, 1974; McSeveney, 1994; Patterson, 2002; Silbey, 1991; Wattenberg, 2002).

A generation later, Progressive reformers took up the populist mantle and began pressing for a series of institutional arrangements that could help forestall the decline in turnout among an increasingly disengaged electorate (Cree, 1892; Sullivan, 1892). Reform-minded scholars, such as Professor Delos Wilcox (1912), lamented how “The curse of our politics is apathy” (p. 107). In addition to home rule, a commission form of local government, the short ballot, the direct primary, direct election of U.S. senators, and nonpartisan elections, advocates of good government touted the initiative, referendum, and recall as mechanisms that could generate excitement at the polls. Wilcox and other reformers of the day averred that the use of ballot initiatives would strengthen democracy by encouraging a more engaged and participatory citizenry (Barnett, 1915; Haynes, 1911). They were optimistic that the substantive nature of ballot measures (policy questions) could impel citizens to go to the polls, as the process would encourage citizens to participate directly in the formulation of public policy.

Today, a century after the initial adoption of the initiative process, participation has reemerged as an important theme in civic discourse, as policymakers and social commentators search for more demo-

cratic and collective mechanisms for sending signals to government (Putnam, 2000; Skocpol & Fiorina, 1999) U.S. voter turnout continues to decline, with only one half of registered voters casting ballots in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections and little more than one third casting votes in the 2002 midterm election (however, see McDonald & Popkin, 2001). Voter turnout rates in the United States are among the lowest in the advanced industrialized nations (Piven & Cloward, 2000; Powell, 1986). Political observers are again turning to direct democracy mechanisms in hopes of increasing electoral participation. Some reformers have suggested that states leading the way in ballot initiatives may well be the first to allow Internet voting and online voter registration (Norris, 2001; Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2003). Indeed, during the 1990s, with the explosion in the use of direct democracy, some political observers began to note that the presence of initiatives on the ballot might positively affect turnout rates in the American states. Even staunch critics of direct democracy, such as *The Washington Post* columnist David Broder (2000) and Peter Schrag (1998), the former editor of the *Sacramento Bee*, concede that citizen lawmaking promotes electoral participation. But does it?

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR INCREASED VOTER TURNOUT

Participation (or lack thereof) emerged as one of the dominant political themes of the 1990s as advocates searched for more democratic and collective mechanisms to allow the electorate to have a voice in government decisions (Mendelsohn & Parkin, 2001; Peters, 1996). Normative theorists, building on the foundational work of Progressive Era scholars, argued that direct forms of democracy could stimulate participation by energizing citizens with a sense of civic duty and political efficacy. Calling for more discursive democracy, strong democracy, teledemocracy, digital democracy, and deliberation, scholars offered a variety of participatory models of decision making designed to make government function better by expanding the circle of voices heard in the policymaking process (Barber, 1984; Budge, 1996; Dryzek, 2000; Fishkin, 1993, 1995; Norris, 2001). Expanding deliberations within the public sphere would allow public

officials to tap new sources of ideas and information when making decisions and enhance the legitimacy of government decisions. More important, it could educate the masses about politics. The prescription is to foster greater individual and collective participation within government organizations and to structure institutions to include mass citizen participation. In its simplest form, participatory government would function as a plebiscite, with the public being asked to decide public issues by a direct vote. These participatory models imply that the system of representative democracy is far from perfect in transmitting the wishes of the public into policy and that direct democracy procedures may improve the situation, even in a complex modern society (Barber, 1984; Peters, 1996).

Running contrary to claims by normative democratic theory scholars, empirical research conducted in the 1980s found that voter turnout did not appreciably increase in states where citizens voted on ballot measures (Everson, 1981; Magleby, 1984). The current study differs from these earlier studies in several ways. First, we use multivariate regression to control for other factors that might also affect voter turnout over time. Second, we examine the number of initiatives on the ballot (or use of the process) and not constitutional provisions for direct democracy (see Bowler & Donovan, 2004b, for a critique of dummy variable measures of direct democracy). Some initiative states, such as California, Colorado, and Oregon, have a large number of policies on the ballot every election, whereas other states, such as Illinois, Mississippi, and Wyoming, have used the process only sparingly. Third, rather than using voter age population (VAP) turnout, as even the more recent studies have used (Lacey, *in press*; D. Smith, 2001; Tolbert, Grummel, et al., 2001), we analyze the impact of initiative use on turnout using voter eligible population (VEP) turnout rates from 1980 through the 2000 presidential and 2002 midterm elections. VEP turnout rates are adjusted to remove noncitizens and convicted felons, which are included in VAP data (McDonald & Popkin, 2001).

Bringing up-to-date initiative use and turnout data is vital, as we witnessed in the 1990s the greatest level of initiative activity in the states during the past century. In the realm of initiative politics, much has changed since Everson (1981) and Magleby (1984) conducted their studies, as well as research using data through the mid-1990s (Lacey, *in press*; M. Smith, 2001; Tolbert, Grummel, et al., 2001). Not

only has the amount of spending on ballot propositions increased exponentially in recent years (Tolbert, Lowenstein, & Donovan, 1998), the usage of the process has exploded during the past two decades, reaching rates comparable only to the first two decades of the 20th century. In the 1990s, for example, more than 300 statewide initiatives qualified for the ballot, a nationwide average of 60 measures per general election. The number of statewide initiatives on the ballot during the decade surpassed that of all others, including the 1910s, the previous high (Tolbert, Lowenstein, et al., 1998). At the dawn of the 21st century, the frequency of measures on the ballot has held steady, with nearly 60 statewide initiatives (and 144 ballot measures, including legislative referenda) qualifying for the 2004 presidential ballot.

DO BALLOT INITIATIVES INCREASE VOTER TURNOUT IN THE STATES?

Reconsidering the impact of initiative use on voter turnout in the states, we pool data for the 20 states over a 22-year period (1980 to 2002) to assess the impact of the number of initiatives appearing on state ballots on voter turnout. The data are analyzed using cross-sectional time-series analysis with panel-corrected standard errors, statistically controlling for variation between states and over time. The dependent variable is average state VEP turnout. No previous research has measured the mobilizing effect of initiatives on statewide VEP turnout rates.

Perhaps lost amid the controversy over hanging chads and butterfly ballots of the 2000 elections, national turnout figures revealed that only 51% of Americans of voting age cast ballots, one of the lowest turnout rates in the 20th century. Traditionally, turnout has been calculated simply as a ratio between the number of people who voted and the number of Americans of voting age. However, McDonald and Popkin (2001) argue that this figure includes people who are ineligible to vote—most notably noncitizens and felons. Since 1972, both of these groups have grown in significant numbers. When excluding these groups of ineligible voters, they find that VEP turnout for the last eight elections has averaged about 56%, with no real downward trend.

Because a high proportion of immigrant noncitizens and felons reside in the western states as well as Florida, which are some of the same states that rely most heavily on direct democracy for governing, this might affect the results of previous research by overestimating (or underestimating) the impact of initiatives in stimulating voter turnout. McDonald and Popkin (2001) create an estimate of VEP turnout by removing illegible voting populations (noncitizens and convicted felons) from the population estimates. We use their estimates of average state VEP turnout as our dependent variable (McDonald, 2004a), which are measures of the votes cast for president, or for U.S. representative in midterm years, divided by each state's VEP. As VEP statewide turnout data are only available from as far back as 1980, we explore the impact of ballot initiatives on voter turnout in 1980 to 2002 elections. As with VAP turnout data (Jackson, Brown, & Wright, 1998; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993), there remains considerable variation in VEP turnout across the 20 states, with lower turnout in the South.

We hypothesize that initiatives appearing on state ballots can spark interest among the electorate, resulting in higher turnout rates over time. In most initiative states, citizens are accustomed to frequently voting on propositions placed on the ballot by citizens, interest groups, or the state legislature. Although previous research has shown a significant turnout effect of ballot measures only in low-information midterm elections, and a much smaller (Tolbert, Grummel, et al., 2001) or nonexistent effect in higher information presidential elections (Lacey, in press; M. Smith, 2001), we expect the recent increased use and heightened citizen interest in ballot measures will lead to a measurable turnout effect in not only midterm but also presidential elections. Specifically, we anticipate that states with more frequent use of the initiative process, measured by the number of initiatives appearing on the statewide ballot every 2 years, from 1980 to 2002, will have higher turnout than states with no or fewer measures on the ballot.

Because voter turnout in initiative states seems to be most pronounced in midterm elections, when ballot measures do not compete with presidential candidates for media attention (Lacey, in press; M. Smith, 2001), one or two initiatives on the ballot during these elections may be sufficient to stimulate increased participation, especially

if the measures concern salient or controversial policy questions, such as gay marriage or affirmative action. In contrast, when ballot initiatives must compete with presidential candidates for media coverage, they may have a minimal effect on turnout, as is borne out by previous research. Another way of conceptualizing the difference between midterm and presidential elections, though, is in terms of voter information. Midterm elections are generally low-information elections with very few sources of mobilization, making the electorate more sensitive to those sources of mobilization that exist, such as ballot measures, whereas presidential elections are high-information elections that have multiple sources of mobilization (Tolbert, Grummel, et al., 2001). Drawing on previous research, we concur that ballot initiatives should have a stronger mobilizing effect in midterm than presidential elections. However, drawing on the framework of the cumulative educative effects of the process of direct democracy (D. Smith & Tolbert, 2004), we hypothesize that ballot initiatives should also lead to increased turnout in presidential elections, regardless of the information environment.

M. Smith's (2001) study, which uses a different explanatory variable, provides a useful comparison. Arguing that not all ballot measures are the same, Smith measures the presence of salient initiatives and legislative referenda—those with a high percentage of front-page newspaper coverage devoted to ballot issues on the day following the election—from 1972 to 1996. Smith finds that the presence of salient initiatives and referenda increases turnout in midterm elections by roughly 3% over states without ballot measures, but not in presidential election years. Without a presidential race on the ballot, voter and media attention focuses instead on state-level issues and candidate contests. Ballot measures that spark interest from a wide cross-section of the public appear to increase voter turnout. Using Smith's measure of salience and Current Population Survey (CPS), Lacey (in press) similarly finds that turnout increases with salient initiatives and referenda on the ballot only in midterm elections. Because Smith's measure raises some questions of content validity (it combines media coverage of citizen initiatives and legislative referenda), reflects the possible bias of newspapers in some states that do not ordinarily refer policy questions to the voters, and has not been updated since the mid-1990s, we use a more direct and simple measure of ballot measure

saliency: the number of initiatives on each statewide ballot in each midterm and general election.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS FOR VARIATIONS IN STATE VOTER TURNOUT

What other demographic, political, and economic factors influence turnout rates across the 50 states? Following Everson's (1981) research, we control for Southern states, which have traditionally had considerably lower turnout rates as a legacy of Jim Crow laws and one-party dominance. We also measure the presence of statewide races—gubernatorial and U.S. Senate elections—using a dummy variable in both cases, coded 1 if the state had such a race and 0 otherwise (M. Smith, 2001; Tolbert, Grummel, et al., 2001). Previous research has shown that voter registration requirements have an important effect on statewide turnout—more stringent registration laws lead to lower voter turnout (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). We measure registration requirements by the number of days before the election one can register to vote in each state: for example, states with election-day registration or no required voter registration are coded 0, and states requiring registration a month before the election are coded 30. At the individual level, scholars and policymakers alike have long recognized differential voter turnout rates by socioeconomic status: Individuals with higher income, education, and occupational status are considerably more likely to vote (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). To control for the effect of an educated populace, we measure the percentage of each state's population with a high school degree or higher. Per capita income for each state during the 22-year period is measured with data from the U.S. Census. In addition, scholars such as Key (1949) and Hero (1998) have found that race plays an important role in subnational U.S. politics. Using 50-state data, Hill and Leighley (1999) demonstrate that during the past half-century, racial diversity is strongly associated with lower levels of voter turnout, weaker mobilizing institutions, and more restrictive voter registration requirements. State racial and ethnic diversity is measured with indices based on 1980, 1990, and 2000 U.S. Census data and 1996 CPS data on the percentage of White non-Hispanic, Latino,

African American, and Asian American populations (see Hero, 1998; Hero & Tolbert, 1996). In a multiple regression analysis, we control for these alternative explanations.

FINDINGS

Previous research on voter turnout suggests that presidential and midterm elections must be analyzed separately, given the substantially higher turnout in presidential elections across states. One study (M. Smith, 2001) finds that the presence of salient propositions on the ballot may be particularly important in driving VAP turnout in midterm elections, with another (Tolbert, Grummel, et al., 2001) showing similar differences using the number of initiatives on the ballot as the primary explanatory variable in predicting VAP turnout. We are interested if there are significant variations when using VEP rather than VAP when measuring turnout rates over time, as well as potential turnout effects in presidential, as well as midterm elections.

VEP TURNOUT: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Departing from previous research, our analysis reveals that states with frequent use of ballot initiatives have on average significantly higher turnout rates in presidential elections. Table 1 presents the impact of the number of initiatives appearing on state ballots on VEP turnout in presidential elections (1980 to 2000) using a cross-sectional time-series regression model with panel-corrected standard errors. Consistent with our hypothesis, voter turnout rates are significantly higher in presidential elections in states with more initiatives on the ballot, controlling for variation in other candidate races on the ballot, registration requirements, state racial or ethnic composition, and socioeconomic conditions. Each initiative appearing on a state's ballot increases turnout by one third of a percent, all else equal.

Scholars of direct democracy warn that too many initiatives on the ballot can decrease voter turnout (Bowler & Donovan, 1998; Magleby, 1984). To test this hypothesis, we examine a nonlinear transformation by adding a squared term for the number of initiatives on the ballot. The quadratic model on the right side of Table 1 appears

TABLE 1
**Impact of Ballot Initiatives on Voter Turnout
 1980-2000 Presidential Elections**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Usage of the Initiative Process</i>		<i>Quadratic Model of Initiative Use</i>	
	β (PCSE)	p Value	β (PCSE)	p Value
Number of initiatives on state ballot _{i,t}	.312* (.112)	.005*	.689* (.200)	.001*
Number of initiatives on state ballot squared _{i,t}			-.030* (.013)	.022*
Southern state _{i,t}	-5.854* (1.402)	.000*	-5.806* (1.370)	.000*
Senate election _{i,t}	.625 (.611)	.306	.647 (.630)	.304
Gubernatorial election _{i,t}	-.844 (.571)	.139	-.861 (.541)	.111
Percentage high school graduates or higher _{i,t}	.022 (.139)	.873	.005 (.143)	.972
State racial diversity _{i,t}	-12.805* (3.294)	.000*	-12.571* (3.221)	.000*
Per capita income _{i,t}	.131 ⁻³ (.235 ⁻³)	.579	.162 ⁻³ (.238 ⁻³)	.495
Registration requirement (closing date) _{i,t}	-.164* (.032)	.000*	-.168* (.032)	.000*
Constant	61.047* (10.561)	.000*	61.499* (10.595)	.000*
Number of groups (i)	50		50	
Observations per group	6		6	
R ²	.487		.491	
Wald χ^2	535.14	.000	572.68	.000
N	300		300	

SOURCE: For number of initiatives appearing on state ballots, 1980 to 1996, see Initiative and Referenda Institute (2002); for 1998 to 2002, see National Conference of State Legislatures (2004). For voter eligible population (VEP) turnout data, 1998 to 2002 see McDonald, 2004b; for 1980 to 1996 see McDonald, 2004c; McDonald & Popkin (2001); and McDonald's Web site: <http://elections.gmu.edu/> (1998, 2000, and 2002).

NOTE: Time-series cross-sectional data for the 50 states. Unstandardized regression coefficients with panel corrected standard errors (PCSE) in parentheses. The notation *i* indicates the unit to which the observations belong, in this case state number, and controls for variation in turnout rates between the states. **p* < .05. (two-tailed).

TABLE 2
What Is the Effect of Each Additional Ballot Initiative on State Voter Turnout (VEP) in Presidential Elections?

	<i>Turnout</i>
No initiatives on the ballot	55.6%
One initiative on the ballot	56.3%
Two initiatives on the ballot	57.0%
Three initiatives on the ballot	57.7%
Four initiatives on the ballot	58.4%
Five initiatives on the ballot	59.1%

NOTE: VEP = voter eligible population. Estimates are based on the assumption that there is a senate and gubernatorial race on the ballot and that it is a nonsouthern state. Percentage of the state population with a high school degree or higher, per capita income, racial diversity, the number of initiatives squared, and voter registration laws held constant at their means. Predicted probabilities are based on coefficients reported in Table 1, quadratic model of initiative use.

to be the appropriate specification for these data, suggesting that turnout levels off when a certain threshold of initiatives on the ballot is met. The covariates for the number of initiatives on the ballot and square term for initiative use are statistically significant. The impact of ballot initiatives on voter turnout in presidential elections is considerably stronger using the quadratic model.

How much does state turnout increase for every additional initiative on the ballot, holding other variations across the states constant? Controlling for the set of explanatory variables discussed earlier, we simulate average voter turnout in presidential elections. As reported in Table 2, each initiative appearing on a state's ballot increases turnout by almost 1% (.70 of a percent), all else equal in presidential elections. This is a nontrivial increase in close statewide elections, with possible implications for national and statewide candidate races.

Our findings suggest that multiple ballot contests encourage citizens to vote in presidential elections, lending support to participatory theories of democracy. The data contradict previous research showing that states with the initiative process do not have higher turnout rates than noninitiative states and that higher turnout rates occur only in midterm elections. Although M. Smith (2001) finds higher turnout rates in midterm elections in states with salient measures on the ballot, he does not detect higher turnout rates in presidential elections. The

fact that turnout increases with initiatives on the ballot in presidential elections is a new finding, departing from previous research.

More important, the substantive impact of initiatives in presidential elections is considerably larger than what other scholars have reported (Tolbert, Grummel, et al., 2001), rivaling the turnout effect of initiatives in midterm elections reported in earlier research. In contrast to previous research, our analysis distinguishes between states that have but rarely use the initiative and states that frequently use the process. Using VEP turnout rates strengthens the relationship between initiatives and voter turnout in presidential elections. We also find that Southern states on average tend to have lower turnout rates than non-Southern states. Southern states have on average 6% lower turnout rates than states in other regions of the United States. States with higher racial and ethnic diversity have lower turnout rates in presidential elections during the past two decades than more homogeneous White states, which confirms earlier research (Hill & Leighley, 1999). States with stricter registration requirements also have lower turnout rates.

The analysis confirms our hypothesis that ballot initiatives increase turnout in presidential elections during the past quarter of a century, bolstering election-day turnout. Increased turnout in presidential elections from ballot initiatives could have significant impacts on candidate races, reshaping the electorate in favor of one candidate or the other. From this analysis, using aggregate-level data it is unclear whether initiatives mobilize partisan voters or nonpartisans, although a study using individual-level survey data suggests that partisan voters are more likely to be mobilized to turn out and vote by ballot measures (Donovan & Smith, 2004).

VEP TURNOUT: MIDTERM ELECTIONS

Table 3 repeats the analysis for midterm elections. As with other studies of voter turnout, we find stronger effects in midterm than presidential elections. The quadratic model (on the right-hand side) is the appropriate specification for these data as the coefficients for the number of initiatives and squared are statistically significant. This indicates that after a certain threshold, voter turnout levels off with additional initiatives appearing on state election ballots. Using VEP

TABLE 3
Impact of Ballot Initiatives on Voter Turnout 1982-2002 Midterm Election

Variables	Usage of the Initiative Process		Quadratic Model of Initiative Use	
	B (PCSE)	p Value	β (PCSE)	p Value
Number of initiatives on state ballot _{i,t}	.795* (.060)	.000*	1.682* (.258)	.000*
Number of initiatives on state ballot squared _{i,t}			-.081* (.024)	.001*
Southern state _{i,t}	-6.021* (.862)	.000*	-5.775* (.734)	.000*
Senate election _{i,t}	2.089* (.203)	.000*	2.002* (.187)	.000*
Gubernatorial election _{i,t}	2.927* (.331)	.000*	2.984* (.347)	.000*
Percentage high school graduates or higher _{i,t}	.123 (.116)	.287	.096 (.102)	.348
State racial diversity _{i,t}	-10.247* (2.263)	.000*	-9.349* (2.078)	.000*
Per capita income _{i,t}	-.181 ⁻³ (.171 ⁻³)	.288	-.151 ⁻³ (.153 ⁻³)	.628
Registration requirement (closing date) _{i,t}	-.158* (.027)	.000*	-.175* (.029)	.000*
Constant	40.364* (8.384)	.000*	41.484* (7.47)	.000*
Number of groups (i)	50		50	
Observations per group	6		6	
R ²	.49		.508	
Wald χ^2	1076.34	.000	4555.07	.000
N	296		296	

SOURCE: For number of initiatives appearing on state ballots: 1980 to 1996, see Initiative and Referenda Institute (2002); for 1998 to 2002, see National Conference of State Legislatures (2004). For VEP turnout data, 1998 to 2002 see McDonald, 2004b; for 1980 to 1996 see McDonald, 2004c; McDonald & Popkin (2001); and McDonald's Web site: <http://elections.gmu.edu/> (1998, 2000, and 2002). Turnout data for MA in 1998, 2000 and 2002 is missing. Note: Time-series cross-sectional data for the 50 states. Unstandardized regression coefficients with panel corrected standard errors (PCSE) in parentheses. The notation *i* indicates the unit to which the observations belong, in this case state number, and controls for variation in turnout rates between the states. **p* < .05 (two-tailed).

TABLE 4
What Is the Effect of Each Additional Ballot Initiative on State Voter Turnout (VEP) in Midterm Elections?

	<i>Turnout</i>
No initiatives on the ballot	41.3%
One initiative on the ballot	43.0%
Two initiatives on the ballot	44.7%
Three initiatives on the ballot	45.4%
Four initiatives on the ballot	47.1%
Five initiatives on the ballot	49.8%

NOTE: VEP = voter eligible population. Estimates are based on the assumption that there is a Senate and gubernatorial race on the ballot and that it is a nonsouthern state. Percentage of the state population with a high school degree or higher, per capita income, racial diversity, the number of initiatives squared, and voter registration laws held constant at their means. Predicted probabilities are based on coefficients reported in Table 3, quadratic model of initiative use.

turnout as the dependent variable again strengthens the relationship between initiatives and voter turnout in low-information midterm elections. Simulating voter turnout in midterm elections, we find (as shown in Table 4) that each additional initiative on the ballot raises state turnout by 1.7%, enough to swing a close candidate election. Stated another way, each initiative appearing on a state's ballot increases turnout by nearly 2% in midterm elections, all else equal. A state with three initiatives on the ballot would be expected to have roughly 5.1% higher voter turnout in midterm elections, holding other differences among the states constant. This compares to a 1.2% increase in turnout for each initiative appearing on the ballot when using the VAP turnout estimates (D. Smith & Tolbert, 2004). This is a noteworthy difference, highlighting the importance of using the VEP turnout data for studies of electoral participation.

We also find that many control variables are statistically significant in predicting state turnout in midterm elections. Southern states have lower turnout in midterm elections, as do states with larger racial and ethnic populations and states with more restrictive registration requirements. States with a gubernatorial or senate election race have higher turnout in midterm elections but not in presidential elections.

Corroborating the findings of other research (Lacey, in press; M. Smith, 2001; Tolbert, Grummel, et al., 2001), our analysis shows that states with frequent use of ballot initiatives have higher turnout

rates (VEP) in midterm elections between 1980 and 2002. As suggested earlier, midterm elections are generally low-information elections, with few sources of mobilization. Numerous ballot initiatives, however, may transform low-information midterm elections into high-information elections, stimulating turnout. Propositions on the ballot also appear to add information to already high-information presidential elections, increasing turnout as well. Our analysis reveals that the turnout effect of initiatives in midterm and presidential elections is significantly larger than scholars had previously thought and that the boost in turnout extends beyond the mid-1990s.

CONCLUSION

We began by proposing to measure Progressive Era wisdom against contemporary reality of one of the educative effects of citizen lawmaking—voter turnout. During that celebrated age of reform, scholars, reformers, legislators, and the general public vigorously discussed the expectations and limitations of citizen lawmaking. By examining empirically some of the normative claims advanced during the Progressive Era, we have tried to reevaluate this enduring debate over the pedagogical nature of the initiative process. Although numerous scholars continue to investigate the direct effects of ballot initiatives on public policy and minority rights, we have begun to test claims regarding the process's indirect effects on political participation, or what some Progressives liked to call the "educative value" of direct democracy (D. Smith & Tolbert, 2004). Lending support to arguments made by Progressive Era reformers and contemporary normative scholars, our analysis indicates that states with more initiatives on the ballot have had higher voter turnout in midterm and presidential elections during the past quarter of a century, controlling for alternative explanations for variation in turnout rates. Studies using individual-level survey data substantiate this finding (D. Smith & Tolbert, 2004; Tolbert, McNeal, et al., 2003). These are notable findings, as the evidence contradicts previous research showing that the initiative process has a negligible impact on voter turnout (Everson, 1981; Magleby, 1984), as well as more recent studies showing that salient ballot measures do not increase electoral participation in presidential

elections (Lacey, in press; M. Smith, 2001) or have only a modest effect (Tolbert, Grummel, et al., 2001).

Clearly, the use of the initiative process matters—more initiatives appearing on statewide ballots lead to higher voter turnout rates over time. Our findings suggest that ballot initiatives in high- and low-information elections have a positive impact on political participation. Initiatives stimulate turnout in presidential and midterm elections; however, the effect remains stronger in midterm elections. Our research is consistent with previous literature (D. Smith, 2001; Tolbert, Grummel, et al., 2001) as well as contradictory, as we find a positive turnout effect in presidential elections and a larger positive turnout effect in midterm elections. It is somewhat surprising to note, we find that VEP estimates actually accentuate the impact of initiative use on turnout compared to VAP, rather than diminish as we had expected. Each initiative appearing on the state ballot leads to almost a 1% increase in turnout in presidential elections and almost a 2% increase in turnout in midterm elections, all else equal. For reasons already discussed, we suggest that the state VEP turnout estimates (McDonald & Popkin, 2001) are likely to be more reliable and valid, and the analysis based on these data is preferable to those based on the VAP turnout estimates.

We should emphasize that we agree with the theoretical justification for increased turnout with policy questions on the ballot offered by M. Smith (2001); the combination of salient ballot measures and campaign efforts can raise turnout. The difference in our findings (evidence of a turnout effect in presidential elections notwithstanding) appears to be rooted in the empirical measurement of direct democracy or initiative use. We suggest the measurement of ballot measure salience used by M. Smith (2001) and his successors (Lacey, in press) may underestimate the true effects of the process on participation rates. Because ballot measure salience is based solely on postelection front-page newspaper coverage of initiative and referendum elections, this might understate the actual salience of policy issues on the ballot among the electorate. We suggest that political information from multiple sources (including online and television media, friends, coworkers, etc.) may not be fully captured by M. Smith's (2001) precise salience measure but may be captured in our measure of the number of initiatives on the ballot, which is more inclusive and takes into

account the cumulative effect that the process of direct democracy has on making citizens more engaged in and knowledgeable about politics (D. Smith & Tolbert, 2004). Likewise, use of VAP turnout rates, rather than VEP turnout rates, appears to understate the relationship between ballot measures and voter turnout.

Another way to conceptualize the difference between our pedagogical argument about the cumulative educative effects of direct democracy, as opposed to ballot measure salience, is in terms of supply and demand. Some citizens are able to learn more in information-rich environments about politics in general (Lupia, 1994; Popkin, 1991). So it is not just the supply side (availability of salient initiatives, referendums, and political campaigns) but the demand side of the equation (e.g., citizen interest and learning) that work together. We suggest that our measure of the number of initiatives on the ballot picks up the supply-and-demand side of this equation, whereas measures of ballot measure salience may only account for supply-side factors (Lacey, *in press*; M. Smith, 2001). Understanding the broad nature of the educative effects of ballot initiatives is new in the literature on direct democracy and underscores our novel finding of a significant turnout effect in presidential elections.

As initiative elections gain use and in importance, they may play a growing role in presidential and midterm elections. As we have witnessed in California and several other states during the past decade, ballot measure proponents and opponents likely will continue to fuse their campaigns with the presidential, U.S. Senate, and gubernatorial candidates and vice versa (Garrett & Smith, 2004; D. Smith & Tolbert, 2001, 2004). In the future, the initiative process and more participatory modes of governance, including Internet mobilization, mail, and even Internet voting, as well as national referendums, may increase voter participation in presidential and midterm election years (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). Given declining U.S. turnout (VAP, if not VEP), the presence of policy questions on the ballot may indeed be a desirable way to mobilize voters. Our analysis lends support to the popular belief that substantive measures on the ballot do mobilize voters and can reshape the electorate, which may have important ramifications for candidate elections. In light of the dramatic growth in the use of citizen initiatives and legislative referenda in the American states in the past 20 years, these positive effects on voter turnout appear to confirm

at least one of the educative effects made by Progressive Era advocates of citizen lawmaking (D. Smith & Tolbert, 2004). As such, observers of similar patterns during the 2003 California recall or the August 2004 Missouri primary should not be surprised, as ballot measures clearly have had a positive effect on voter turnout over time.

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