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Having a Say: Political Efficacy in the Context of Direct Democracy

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Abstract

We lay out three alternative views of the impact of direct democracy on voters' civic orientations. According to one view, direct democracy restores the people's faith in their ability to shape government policy. A second view argues that direct democracy, while a promising idea, fails in reality to promote citizens' belief in their own competence. A third view, which we develop here as a more nuanced alternative, predicts that either result is possible, with the outcome contingent on the nature of the propositional environment, especially the salience of propositions. Salience, it seems to us, works through two mechanisms: *inherent interest* and *publicity.* We tested all three alternative views with a dataset merging individual civic orientations from the 1998 NES with state-level characteristics, including measures of the propositional environment. We found that propositions per se do nothing for – or against – civic orientations. The salience of propositions, however, affects civic orientations at a substantial magnitude. In particular, state-specific news coverage of propositions (our measure of publicity) increases internal efficacy, and national news coverage of state propositions (our measure of inherent interest) increases voters' interest in the campaign. Neither variable increases political trust or general interest in politics, suggesting that direct democracy has specific and circumscribed effects.

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Having a Say: Political Efficacy in the Context of Direct Democracy

The 1990s brought an explosion of ballot propositions to the states. During that decade, the Progressive impulse to directly empower the voters reached a new high, as the number of propositions facing voters ballooned far beyond the number in any previous decade (Wolfensberger 2000, chapter 9).[1] The intensity of proposition campaigns has increased exponentially as well (Gerber 1999, 5). In 1998 alone, the campaigns spent over a quarter-billion dollars on ballot initiatives (Broder 2000, 17-18).

While this trend has caught the eye of many scholars and observers, we know little about its impact on the intended beneficiaries: the voters themselves. In this paper we ask how voters respond to their chance to enact laws. More specifically, we investigate whether voters feel empowered by ballot propositions and whether their interest in elections rises with their rising opportunity to have a say. We begin by laying out two opposed expectations about the impact of direct democracy. Our next step is to develop our own view on the matter, a view that places the salience of ballot propositions at center stage. We then test all three alternatives with a dataset that merges citizens' individual-level civic orientations with measures of state propositional environment. We find that ballot propositions per se are unrelated to civic attitudes, but that the inherent interest of propositions in a given election is associated with citizens' interest in the campaign and that the level of media publicity that propositions receive is related to citizens' sense that they can understand and influence the political process.

Why referenda and initiatives may enhance voters' civic orientations

One view of the rising number of ballot propositions expects these to increase citizens' engagement. One piece of evidence for this view is the simple fact that citizens favor the principle of self-rule. Polls consistently show that the public is highly majoritarian in taste, and at least in the abstract, believes in the supremacy of popular rule (Cronin 1989, 80; but see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001). Surveys in heavy-use states such as Washington and California found that even as the number of ballot measures rose to new heights, three-quarters or more of those answering the question approved of ballot propositions (Broder 2000, 208-9, 229; Citrin 1996). Although it is likely an exaggeration, one poll found that approximately 50% of California voters cited initiatives as "the main reason for voting in 1996," while only 36% "said the presidential contest was the principal motivator" (Broder 2000, 209).

Moreover, as advocates of ballot propositions would hope, some studies find that citizens get their way more often when they can use initiatives (Wagschal 1997). For example, Gerber (1999, chapter 7) shows that public policy is more consistent with citizen preferences in initiative states, especially those with easier signature requirements on initiatives, than in non-initiative states.[2] In addition, it appears that

[1] The Progressive era introduced both referenda, legislative measures put to a popular vote, and initiatives, citizen-initiated measures put to a popular vote. Counting initiatives alone, the number has increased from 88 in the 1960s to 181 in the 1970s to 257 in the 1980s to 359 in the 1990s (Referendum and Initiative Institute 2001).

[2] Gerber (1999) finds that legislatures respond better to citizen preferences on the death penalty and parental consent for abortion in initiative states. Matsusaka (1995) shows that initiative states spend less, have smaller governments, and engage in less redistribution, than non-initiative states (but see Lascher et al. 1996).

citizens have more say in which propositions pass than do business groups (which had been viewed as the scourge of democracy by the Populists and Progressives advocating direct democracy) (Gerber 1999, chapter 6). If citizens perceive that the referendum and initiative process indeed empowers them, then they should feel more efficacious and interested in their self-governance. As the Progressive advocates of referenda and initiatives expected, direct democracy may have succeeded in "revivifying the morale of the citizen" (Hofstadter 1955, quoted in Broder 2000, 28).

Taking this logic to its farthest reach, we might expect that even levels of trust in elected officials will rise, as voters come to see that direct democracy facilitates rather than replaces representative democracy. Some of the most influential supporters of direct democracy came by their support out of a conviction that propositions will restore voters' faith in their government, and specifically in their elected representatives: "in these measures. . . we are not dispensing with representative government, but making sure that we are going to have it," concluded Woodrow Wilson (quoted in Wolfensberger 2000, 62). According to this view, not only may efficacy and interest rise with the use of propositions, but so too will political trust and external efficacy, the sense that the political system responds to the voice of the people.

More generally, the advocates of ballot initiatives tend to adhere to the tenets of participatory democracy, which expects meaningful participation to transform citizens into civic-minded participants in communal life. Participatory democrats believe that the more people participate in self-governance, the more competent, interested, and satisfied they will feel (Barber 1984; Mansbridge 1983; Pateman 1970; Thompson 1970). Some systematic empirical studies offer support for this proposition (Elden 1981; Leighly 1991). In the best analysis to date, Finkel's panel analysis found that campaign participation increases feelings of external efficacy (Finkel 1985).

Many treatments of the effects of direct democracy on civic attitudes follow in the spirit of participatory democracy. Typical of early advocates of ballot propositions, the labor leader and journalist J. W. Sullivan argued that if citizens were entrusted with direct democracy, "each would consequently acquire education in his role, and develop a lively interest in the public affairs in part under his own management" (quoted in Cronin 1989, 48; see also Donovan and Bowler 1998, 2). More recent scholarly treatments similarly conclude that direct democracy, as intended, "often does stir interest," and that citizens living in initiative states are more likely to vote and to express an interest in campaigns (Cronin 1989, 226, 227; see also Butler and Ranney 1994; Schmidt 1989, 28). In the most sophisticated analysis to date, Smith finds that salient propositions increase aggregate turnout in off-year elections (2001). Along these lines, a highly salient referendum campaign in Canada increased citizens' specific knowledge about the referendum (though only modestly), and may have elevated their efficacy and interest (Mendelsohn and Cutler 2000). So we might expect that citizens living in states that offer citizens plentiful, institutionalized opportunities to participate in important decisions about public affairs exhibit higher levels of efficacy and interest in politics.

Why referenda and initiatives may not affect, or may even undermine, civic orientations

In counterpoise to this sanguine view are several criticisms of direct democracy. While some agree that referenda and initiatives *could* increase citizens' engagement in politics, they argue that in current *practice*, these measures fail to fulfill their purpose, and may even backfire. The number of ballot propositions has risen not through the actions of the citizenry at large, some argue, but primarily because well-funded interest groups learned to use propositions for their own narrow purposes (Magleby 1984;

Wolfensberger 2000, 140-141). The process of placing measures on the ballot and campaigning on their behalf is often so costly that it is beyond the reach of ordinary citizens. So, the argument continues, at the same time that citizens obtained many more opportunities to vote on law, those opportunities were increasingly made hollow by organized interests and the initiative industry. These professional political actors "captured" what was supposed to be a grassroots process (Magleby "direct legislation" p 234).

While other scholars contest the hypothesis that business interests have captured direct democracy, they agree that rather than equalizing the field, the initiative process favors groups that are already well mobilized (Gerber 1998). And while citizen groups appear to do better than business interests in passing direct legislation, business groups in turn may make better use of the threat of propositions, and they clearly succeed better than citizens at shooting down propositions they oppose (Gerber 1999).

Consonant with the claim that the original design of the proposition process has been corrupted, some studies find that initiatives fail to increase turnout, an important element of civic engagement, and Citrin found that citizens in states with direct democracy were no more efficacious or trusting of government than were those in other states (Citrin 1996; also see Everson 1981; Magleby 1984; 1994, p. 245). Moreover, Magleby finds that voting roll-off is greater for propositions than it is for elective offices ("direct leg" p. 246-47). People vote less for propositions, even the most controversial ones, than they do for top elective offices, which means that those who do vote are disproportionately of high socio-economic status (Magleby 1984).

Finally, when they do pass, initiatives may work contrary to voters' expectations, which in turn may depress efficacy and interest. Some studies find that citizens in initiative states influence policy no more than their counterparts in non-initiative states (Lascher et al 1996). While Lascher et al. replicated Matsusaka's finding that initiative states are more fiscally regressive, their direct measure of public opinion shows that such regressive policies actually run counter to the public will (Lascher et al 1996). Others find, along similar lines, that many successful propositions reduce spending far beyond what voters intended (Donovan and Bowler 1998; Schrag 1998). In all, this evidence could mean that ballot initiatives do not in fact empower citizens, and thus may not enhance the civic orientations of political interest and efficacy.

Even those who believe, contrary to the foregoing, that direct democracy does work fairly well, tend to argue that there is such a thing as too much direct democracy. From his observations of Massachusetts town meetings in the 1950s, Wood concluded that when people have many opportunities to legislate, they become more rather than less alienated from the political process. "An excessive reliance on direct popular action," he argued, "can lead . . . to no popular action at all with the citizens baffled and perplexed and the expert and small clique in charge" (1958, 284). The large number of propositions, and their complexity, may ask too much of voters. By this logic, a small modicum of direct rule promotes engagement, but any more will backfire. "The initiative process," quipped a recent Oregon secretary of state, "is like 190-proof alcohol – a little goes a long way" (quoted in Broder 2000, 207). According to this logic, a few ballot propositions may heighten the people's belief in their own capacity to understand politics and to influence its course, and may pique their interest in public affairs. But when voters face too many propositions, some argue, they may become overwhelmed and consequently less efficacious and interested than they would be otherwise.

This argument sometimes proceeds from the premise that the Progressives meant to use referenda and initiatives sparingly. "The progenitors [of the ballot proposition] . . . intended that it be used only selectively as a safety valve when representative democracy is not functioning properly. The proliferation of complex, confusing, and even conflicting initiatives on the same ballot goes far beyond the safety valve category" (Wolfensberger 2000, 145). Woodrow Wilson advocated referenda and initiatives on the explicit rationale that they would serve as a deterrent and not come into play except in rare circumstances.[3] On this logic, the American political system cannot function well if the people rule directly as a matter of course. We should not expect voters to rise to the task of continuous self-governance. That is not their function in a representative system. They would not only fail at it, but also sense as much. According to this argument, voters may become less efficacious and interested than they would be without any propositions on the ballot.

A Third Way: The Contingency of News Coverage

In sum, two distinct views about the impact of propositions on voters present themselves. They are, in many ways, diametrically opposed. Yet it is possible to reconcile them to some extent by introducing a measure of contingency. Perhaps the availability of propositions can indeed increase voters' civic orientations – under certain circumstances (see Smith 2001 for a similar, though very brief, argument). When propositions are highly contested and much discussed, they catch the attention of the media and of elites. The media and elites in turn provide enough information and cues to voters that they help voters make sense of the complex choices before them, thus enhancing voters' interest and sense of competence. Cronin, for example, suggests that the voting roll off from statewide offices to propositions has eroded and even reversed on highly contentious and salient measures (1989, 68). In these cases, voters seem to be more aware of the ballot measures than they are of state legislative and congressional candidates. In any case, by focusing on the role of salience and information, we hope to build a more nuanced view that goes beyond the opposed predictions of supporters and opponents.

While some studies suggest that conflict and salience may enhance the workings of the referendum process, the literature on the whole has neglected the role of information (see Bowler and Donovan 1998, Lupia 1994, and Smith 2001 for exceptions). Clearly, the communication that goes on during proposition campaigns matters a great deal, to judge by frequent and large movements of public preferences: Magleby finds that many propositions begin with a great deal of public support but proceed to lose much of it by election day (1984; see also Darcy and Laver 1990). So the information environment surrounding propositions is capable of affecting at least some aspects of citizens' attitudes. Just what the effect is, however, and on which attitudes, is uncertain.

Some detractors of the ballooning number of propositions emphasize the overwhelming volume of information necessary to make a reasonable vote decision.[4] Oregon's official informational "pamphlet" in

[3] "The initiative and referendum will not be the ordinary means of legislation. They will be the very salutary gun kept in the closet. The knowledge that if they do not represent, representatives will be dispensed with, will make representatives represent" (Woodrow Wilson, in Wolfensberger 2000, 62).

[4] As of the late 1980s, CA, MA, MT, OR and WA sent to every household an official description of and arguments pro and con each ballot measure. Cronin estimates that 30-60% of voters rely on these booklets (1989, 80).

1998 numbered 248 pages, "almost as long as *War and Peace* but with less of a discernable plot," according to one ambivalent supporter of the initiative process (Broder 2000, 207).[5] So the increasing number of propositions may come with so much information that voters may end up feeling less efficacious and interested than before.

But others argue that voters need not become experts to make sense of the choices confronting them, even when the number of choices is large (Bowler and Donovan 1998; Lupia 1994). Some evidence suggests that voters are adept at using cues and shortcuts in reaching decisions about propositions (Bowler and Donovan 1998). Those who use these devices may reach preferences similar to voters who take the trouble to inform themselves in a thorough way (Lupia 1994).

The key to the civic impact of direct democracy, then, may lie with the extent to which propositions are made meaningful to voters. Citizens, an early observer noted, vote on propositions either when the issue is of "inherent interest," or "discussion and publicity" has piqued their interest (Bowler and Donovan 1998, 13). *Inherent interest* and *publicity*, it seems to us, are in fact two very different characteristics of the "propositional environment" that might influence voters' civic orientations.

Let us begin with the latter. *Publicity* about propositions might affect citizens in three ways. First, most voters report that they learn about propositions from the stream of communication that is available in the media and other forms of campaign communication (Cronin 1989, 83; Karp 1998; Magleby 1984). Thus the more information about propositions voters receive from the media, the more sense they can make of those propositions, and the more likely they are to feel that they can participate meaningfully in shaping government policy.[6]

In addition to raw information about ballot propositions, media coverage often contains cues from political and social elites. Thus a second way in which publicity can influence citizens is by providing simple and easily discernable cues that inform them of who supports what measure (Lupia 1994; see Popkin 1991 for a more general version of this argument). Those who like a political actor and learn the actor's position on the proposition are much more likely to follow the actor's cue (Karp 1998; Wenzel, Donovan and Bowler 1998). Whether through exposure to raw information or elite cues, citizens who are better informed about the propositions they face are likely to feel more confident in their voting decisions and better able to participate competently in politics.

Finally, publicity about propositions may serve to remind citizens of their opportunity to participate directly in shaping government policy. The more attention the media devote to propositions, the more salient those opportunities are likely to be. Thus publicity about propositions may raise citizens' political efficacy by priming them to think about ballot propositions.

[5] And in 1990 in CA, for example, voters were given informational booklets numbering over 220 pages and in two volumes (Wolfensberger 2000, 142).

[6] Exposure to "paid media" (i.e., campaign advertisements) can also enhance voters' attention to and information about ballot propositions. For example, Bowler and Donovan found evidence that the higher the spending on propositions, the more aware of them voters became (1998 Demanding, p. 152).

Through all of these mechanisms—raw information, elite cues, and priming—we expect that the more publicity propositions receive in a given state, the more politically efficacious its citizens will become.

In addition to the level of publicity state ballot propositions receive, we also consider the *inherent interest* of the propositions offered to voters. After all, ballot propositions span a wide range from obscure and seemingly unimportant matters to contentious hot button issues. In 1998, for example, New Hampshire voters were asked to decide whether or not to lower the eligibility age for state senator while Minnesotans weighed in on whether the position of state treasurer should be eliminated. At the same time, voters in other states were deciding questions about same-sex marriages, abortion limitations, gambling, and the medical use of marijuana. Even recognizing that judgments of a proposition's inherent interest will vary from one citizen to the next, it is clear that, on average, some propositions will appear to voters as opportunities to decide important aspects of state policy while others will appear to have little consequence one way or the other.

All propositions are not created equal, and it would be surprising if citizens respond in the same way to trivial ballot propositions as they do to propositions which they perceive to have significant consequences. In addition, citizens are likely to respond differently to well-publicized propositions than to propositions that receive little attention. In our analyses below, we take into account the existence and extent of ballot propositions as most previous work has done. But we also attempt to measure the amount of publicity that propositions within a given state received and the inherent interest of those propositions as judged by outside observers.[7] In the pages that follow, we relate these elements of state propositional environment to citizens' civic attitudes. Our principal questions are whether propositions per se or other aspects of the propositional environment (publicity and inherent interest) influence citizens' attitudes toward the political process, and if so, in what ways.

Data and Measures

For the analyses in this paper, we have combined the 1998 American National Election Studies (NES) with contextual data for the 27 states represented in the NES survey.[8] Our primary measures from the NES include the five questions about political efficacy (see tables 1 and 2) and questions about respondents' political trust and their interest in politics and public affairs (table 3).[9] In addition to these measures, we use the NES measures of respondent age, sex, race (black/non-black), Hispanic ethnicity, family income, years of education, and region of residence as controls.

Our contextual variables include each state's propositional environment with measures tapping both the actual number of state propositions or initiatives and the "inherent interest" and "publicity" of state propositions as described below. Following the dominant terminology, we distinguish between

[7] To our knowledge Smith (2001) is the only previous quantitative analysis that assess the inherent interest or publicity of state ballot propositions.

[8] The 1998 NES includes two respondents from Washington D.C. Due to the unique political environment of Washington D.C. and the lack of comparable contextual data (for example, on the partisan balance of state political control) we have excluded these two respondents from all analyses.

[9] See the NES codebook at http://www.umich.edu/~nes/ for the exact text of these items.

propositions (ballot measures put to the voters for approval), initiatives (propositions which have been placed on the ballot by citizens through a process of collecting signatures), and referenda (propositions placed on the ballot by state legislatures).

We employ four measures of actual proposition use: a dummy variable indicating whether or not the state had any propositions on the ballot in the 1998 general election; a variable indicating the number of propositions on the state ballot in the 1998 general election; a dummy variable indicating whether or not the state currently allows citizens to place initiatives on the ballot; and a measure of the average number of initiatives that have appeared on the state's ballots in each election cycle since the initiative process was instituted.[10]

To measure the varying inherent interest of propositions across states in the 1998 general election and the amount of attention these propositions received, we make use of state and national media coverage. Specifically, we assess the publicity devoted to states' ballot propositions in the 1998 election by examining the front page of each state's largest circulation newspaper on the day after the election. Day-after election coverage is almost always accompanied by a summary box that lists the results of the most important election contests. Our measure of publicity is formed by counting the number of state proposition results reported in each newspaper's "box score" and dividing by the total number of box score results reported. Thus, using the box score as a counting device, we gauge the proportion of election coverage devoted to ballot propositions in each state.[11]

Of course, our measure of newspaper box scores is only a proxy for our real interest: the broader state-specific media coverage of ballot propositions throughout the election period. Our expectation is that the level of day-after coverage of state ballot propositions reflects a newspaper's broader assessment about the "newsworthiness" of its state's propositions in a given election and hence will be strongly correlated with the amount of newspaper coverage those propositions received throughout the campaign period. In addition, we believe newspapers are the appropriate media source to gauge attention to state propositions because (1) local television news in most cities offers little coverage of state politics (Kaniss 1991) and national television news only covers state propositions in rare cases, and (2) voters report that newspapers are the most common source of information about state ballot propositions other than official state ballot handbooks (Bowler and Donovan 1998, 56). We recognize, nonetheless, that our measure of newspaper box scores is a crude and therefore "noisy" proxy for state propositional publicity.[12]

Our second measure of media coverage of state propositions is intended to capture the "inherent interest" of propositions on each states' 1998 general election ballot. This measure consists of the sum of

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[10] The first two of these measures were derived by examining official state web sites and contacting state Attorneys Generals' offices; the latter two measures are taken from Tolbert et al. 1998, table 2.1.

[11] We use the percentage of box score reports devoted to propositions rather than the raw number because the percentage (1) compensates for different newspapers' traditions of reporting few or many election results in their front-page summary boxes, and (2) compensates for the presence of other "newsworthy" election results (e.g., mayoral, gubernatorial, or senate races) which might draw attention away from the proposition campaigns in voters minds as well as in news coverage. We have replicated the analyses in tables 2 and 3 using the raw count of proposition box scores and found little difference in the results.

[12] In future work we plan to compare our "box score" measure of publicity with one derived from coding newspaper coverage of propositions over the entire month preceding the election.

the mentions of propositions from each state mentioned in the day-after "wrap up" stories on propositions published in the *New York Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and *USA Today* (Cronbach's alpha=.93).[13] The result is an open-ended variable, which ranges from zero mentions (for 15 states) to 10 mentions for California and 11 for Washington state (see appendix 1). The logic of this variable is that issues of greater inherent interest are most likely to be covered in national post-election stories on direct democracy. High scores on this measure reflect both a greater consensus among news organizations about the inherent interest of a given proposition and the number of inherently interesting propositions on a given state's ballot. Like our measure of state-specific coverage, this measure of national coverage is only a crude reflection of the inherent interest of each states' propositions. In future work, we plan to supplement this variable with observers' ratings of the inherent interest of ballot propositions.

As one might expect, our two media-based measures of state propositional environment are related (Pearson's r=.60). Nevertheless, as we show below, these two measures are differentially related to citizens' civic attitudes and appear to be tapping into distinct aspects of states' propositional environments.

Findings

We look first at the relationship between citizen efficacy and our measures of state proposition use per se. If the ability to "have a say" encourages citizens to take a more sanguine view of their place in the political system and their ability to contribute in a meaningful way to the political process, one might expect there to be a difference in the levels of efficacy expressed by individuals from states which have propositions and those from states which do not. In this exercise, we use several measures of political efficacy as dependent variables. The five different measures of efficacy on the NES survey capture different aspects of the concept. Internal efficacy—one's perceived ability to participate competently in the political system—is clearly captured by one of the items we use ("Sometimes, politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on.") Two other items ("Over the years, how much attention do you feel the government pays to what people think when it decides what to do?" and "Do you feel that having elections makes the government pay attention to what people think?") measure external efficacy—one's beliefs about the responsiveness of the political system no matter what one's perceived ability to participate. The final two items we employ ("People like me don't have any say about what the government does" and "Public officials don't care much what people like me think") tap into both aspects of the concept (Craig, Niemi, and Silver 1990; see Acock and Clarke 1990 for an alternative classification). We also construct a five-variable scale to capture overall efficacy differences among respondents (Cronbach's alpha = .69).

[13] To be more exact, our measure of publicity is derived by counting the number of propositions in a given state mentioned in a particular newspaper's wrap-up article (or articles). These scores were then combined across the three papers to provide the final count. Thus if a given proposition appeared twice in the wrap up article in *USA Today*, it received only a single "point" from that paper. However, if the same proposition was mentioned by two different papers, it received two points toward the overall score for that state. Given that there were medical marijuana propositions in several states, the *New York Times* ran a separate article just on that issue. If a state proposition was mentioned in this separate article, this merited a point on our national coverage scale. None of these marijuana propositions were mentioned in the *Times*' general article on state propositions.

As the first column in table 1 shows, respondents from states that had propositions on the ballot in 1998 are neither more nor less efficacious than those from states with no propositions in 1998. The results presented here as well as in tables 2 and 3 reflect the association between propositional environment and civic attitudes while controlling for respondents' individual characteristics (age, sex, race, ethnicity, income, education, and region of residence) and for state-level contextual characteristics (percent white, percent black, median state income, percent of state residents with college degrees, and balance of partisan control of the state legislature).[14] The zero-order relationships (not reported) also fail to show any statistically or substantively significant association for any of the relationships shown in table 1.

table 1 about here

If the hypothesis that propositions affect political efficacy fails in this first case, perhaps it is because we have not accounted for some of the important variation in proposition states. Perhaps it is the number of propositions on the ballot that matters, not simply the presence or absence of propositions. Perhaps it requires a meaningful number of propositions for voters to derive some sense that their votes make a difference. As the second column of table 1 shows, this does not appear to be the case: there is no relationship between the number of propositions on a state's ballot and its citizens' efficacy.

Yet another way of testing this idea is by separating respondents from initiative states—states where citizens have the ability to place propositions on the ballot through petition—from those who simply face propositions placed on the ballot by state legislatures. In many cases, citizens will be unaware of the route a given proposition took to get on the ballot, but perhaps the more complete nature of direct democracy in the case of initiatives will be apparent to enough citizens to make a difference. If so, the distinction between initiative and non-initiative states may be more important than that between proposition and non-proposition states. As in our previous two tests, however, the dichotomy of initiative/non-initiative states is unrelated to efficacy (table 1, column 3).[15]

Finally, we ask whether the impact of proposition voting comes only with time, whether it requires a longer history of practice with a larger numbers of initiatives. If the impact of state propositional environment is cumulative, then a snapshot of conditions during a single election may not capture the important differences among states. In the fourth column of table 1 we therefore report the relationship between efficacy and the average number of initiatives per election cycle since the introduction of the initiative process in each state. Once again, we fail to find any relationship. Nor is there any relationship

[14] The balance of partisan control of the state legislature is intended to distinguish states with contentious political environments from those with a single dominant party. It is constructed as follows: for each legislative chamber, political balance = 1 – (number of seats separating Democrats and Republicans/total number of seats). This variable has a theoretical range from 0 (for a legislature composed entirely of members of one party) to 1 (for a legislature with equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans). Scores for the two legislative chambers are averaged to produce each state's political balance score (Nebraska, with its unicameral legislature, is not represented in the 1998 NES sample).

[15] This lack of association is consistent with Citrin (1996).

between the highly correlated measure of cumulative number of initiatives per state and citizen efficacy (not shown).[16]

Simply living in a state that allows for voters to confront public policy choices directly does not encourage people to think more favorably about their own place in the system. It does not change their view of their ability to participate, despite the fact that they have the opportunity to participate in a rather extraordinary way. And it does not lead them to reassess how responsive the system is.

As suggested earlier, the relationship between a state's level of proposition use and its citizens' political efficacy might be curvilinear. Perhaps propositions do enhance efficacy when used in moderation, but too many propositions overwhelm voters and decrease their sense of efficacy. To assess this possibility, we added a quadratic term for the number of propositions in 1998 and for the average number of propositions per election cycle to the regression models reported in table 1, columns 3 and 5. None of the linear (first-order) coefficients attained statistical significance in the presence of the quadratic term, nor were any of the quadratic terms themselves statistically significant. Based on the number of propositions that voters face, a small amount of direct democracy does not appear to increase citizens' efficacy, nor does a large dose of direct democracy appear to depress efficacy.[17]

Having failed to find any significant relationships between citizens' efficacy and any of our measures of state proposition use, we turn next to our measures of propositional publicity and inherent interest. As noted above, simply living in a proposition state, or a state with large numbers of propositions on current or past ballots, may not suffice to raise citizen efficacy. This may not be that surprising, for we are lumping together respondents coming from states with very different kinds of propositions.

In bringing the salience of the proposition issues into the analysis, we move the hypothesis forward a bit. The simple ability to vote directly on public policy may not change how people think about their place in the political system, but a series of important propositions, or an election period in which propositions receive extensive media attention, may encourage individuals to think more directly about their ability to participate in direct democracy.

As shown in table 2, media attention to propositions does appear to matter—at least to some aspects of political efficacy. With the individual and state-level characteristics listed above held constant, we find that state-specific media coverage (our measure of publicity) is related to two of the five efficacy variables, and to the five-point efficacy scale. Respondents from states with greater news coverage of propositions are significantly more likely to believe that they have a say in government, and that politics are not too complicated to figure out. To give some sense of the size of this relationship, we can compare the impact of propositional publicity with that of respondent's education—by far the strongest correlate of political efficacy (see appendix 2). The difference between being in a proposition-less state (or in a state

[16] The lack of association between cumulative number of propositions and efficacy is inconsistent with Bowler and Donovan (2001) who report a significant relationship based on similar analyses of the 1992 NES. In analyses not shown, we have replicated their models as closely as possible using the 1998 NES and do not find significant relationships with any of the efficacy measures that the two NES surveys have in common. We are still attempting to determine the reason for our differing results.

[17] The lack of a curvilinear relationship is consistent with Bowler and Donovan (2001).

where propositions are not covered at all) and being in a state where propositions receive the maximum amount of attention in our data set,[18] is associated with an increase in the efficacy scale equivalent to 3.2 years of education, approaching the difference between a high school graduate and someone with a college degree. Thus the relationship between propositional publicity and citizen efficacy is both statistically and substantively significant.

table 2 about here

It is notable that the relationship between state-specific newspaper coverage and efficacy varies so much across the different efficacy dependent variables. As we note above, the five measures on the 1998 NES survey reflect varying combinations of internal and external efficacy. The first two items in table 2, which most clearly tap respondents' external efficacy, are unrelated to propositional environment. The question about politics being "too complicated for people like me," which most clearly taps internal efficacy, is related to state-specific news coverage of propositions. Finally, one of the two remaining items, which combine elements of both internal and external efficacy, is related to our state-specific news variable.

From these results it appears that media attention to state propositions during an election enhances citizens' sense of their ability to understand and participate in politics, while having little or no impact on their perceptions of government responsiveness. If media attention to propositions helps citizens acquire the information necessary to make confident voting decisions, then it follows that their sense of internal efficacy should rise. One also might expect external efficacy to respond to well-covered ballot propositions, since citizens are being offered an opportunity to directly shape the direction of government policy. But the external efficacy items on the NES do not ask about whether government *policy* responds to the preferences of the citizens, but rather about whether public officials or government as an institution pays attention or cares about voters' wishes. To the extent that respondents view propositions as taking power and authority *away* from public officials (which, to some degree, is the case), well-publicized propositions would not lead respondents to attribute more caring or responsiveness to government or to public officials.

In a rather surprising twist, national media coverage of propositions fails to have an impact on any of the efficacy items or on the efficacy scale as a whole (table 2). Those who live in states with nationally covered propositions are not less likely to believe that politics is too complicated or more likely to think that people like themselves have a say in what the government does. Thus, it appears that the publicity that propositions receive, not their inherent interest per se, has the largest impact on efficacy. We shall return to this finding below.

The relationship between state-specific media coverage of propositions and efficacy is noteworthy, especially given the survey we are working with. The NES does not ask respondents their opinions on ballot propositions directly, and while a couple of issues covered by some ballot propositions -- affirmative action, English as an official language, abortion -- are asked of respondents, the questions are not asked in the context of specific ballot questions. Respondents are thus not being primed to consider their opportunity to participate in proposition elections, and we are tapping into pre-existing levels of

[18]Colorado is the state in which propositions were most heavily covered, with 44 percent of the summary box devoted to proposition results.

efficacy held by respondents. It is likely that priming respondents to think about propositions would enhance the relationships we find here, and even generate some relationships where we do not find them. After all, as Zaller and Feldman (1992) write and demonstrate, "People do not merely *reveal* preexisting attitudes on surveys; to some considerable extent, people are using the questionnaire to decide what their attitudes are" (p. 582, emphasis in original). But we view the absence of priming to be a virtue. That we have used an unobtrusive method here means that we have a fairer test. The fact that the relationship appears under these circumstances is especially compelling evidence that one's political environment can influence one's general civic orientations.

As our findings suggest, all propositions are not equal. But then neither are all citizens. In a series of analyses not reported we explored the possibility that state propositional environment might impact different respondents in different ways. In particular, we looked for evidence of interactions between the measures of propositional environment shown in tables 1 and 2 and respondents' education, their level of political information, their level of news consumption, and the strength of their partisan identification. We did not find significant interactions for any of these characteristics, suggesting that state propositional environment has a similar effect on citizens with varying levels of political sophistication and engagement.

In our last set of analyses we attempt to assess whether we really are capturing the phenomenon we describe. We have shown above that state-specific coverage of propositions affects respondents' internal, but not external, efficacy. We show next that state-specific coverage of propositions does not lead to some kind of generalized good will toward government or interest in politics and public affairs. If our argument holds water, the effects of media coverage of propositions should be confined to those attitudes most linked to the subjective experience of political participation, and should not extend to attitudes toward government performance.

In table 3, we look at the effect of state-specific and national media coverage on general trust in government, general interest in public affairs, and whether respondents' care who wins in their congressional districts. As expected, we find no relationship between any of these civic attitudes and either measure of propositional environment. The lack of association with these alternative attitudinal constructs also reassures us that the relationships we do find between propositional publicity and internal efficacy (reported in table 2) are in fact due to the specific characteristics of state propositional environment that we measure and not to some correlated but unmeasured characteristic of the states.

table 3 about here

In contrast to most of the relationships shown in table 3, media coverage does have an impact on respondents' interest in the 1998 campaigns, and it is national media coverage, not state-specific coverage, that carries the punch. The inherent interest of a state's propositions is related to the interest in the campaign that its citizens express. But as we saw earlier, only the amount of attention propositions receive—not their inherent interest—is related to citizen efficacy. In other words, having inherently interesting or important propositions on the ballot does not enhance citizens' sense of efficacy, unless they receive sufficient information about those propositions to feel confident in their ability to choose sides.[19]

[19] Regression models of efficacy that include interactions between our measures of propositional publicity and inherent interest suggest that at low levels of publicity, the relationship between inherent interest and

An alternative explanation for the lack of association between political efficacy and our measure of inherent interest might be that the judgments of propositions' inherent interest made by national news organizations do not parallel those made by citizens or media outlets in a given state. Some propositions may appear important to a state's residents while having little significance or interest for news consumers in the rest of the country. But as we show in table 3, national news coverage of state propositions, although unrelated to political efficacy, is related to differences across states in respondents' interest in the 1998 election. Thus it is not simply that our state-specific media variable is a better measure than our national media variable, but that the two measures appear to be reflecting two different aspects of state propositional environment.

The relationship between the inherent interest of a state's propositions and its citizens' interest in the campaign is reassuring, both because it confirms that our measure of inherent importance is indeed reflecting a significant aspect of the state propositional environment, and because it enhances the discriminant validity of our state-specific measure of media attention. The presence of important propositions should provoke interest in the campaign, especially during an off-year election. But unless citizens also receive enough information to feel that they can make a confident choice on those propositions, inherent interest per se will not enhance efficacy.

In sum, we find that raw counts of state proposition use are unrelated to political efficacy. This holds true in our analyses whether we consider all ballot propositions or initiatives only, and whether we look at propositions appearing in the current election or over time. In contrast, we find that the publicity a state's propositions receive is related to internal political efficacy while the inherent interest of state propositions relates to citizens' interest in the current campaign. The differential association of these different aspects of state propositional environment with citizens' civic attitudes underscores the importance of attending to the distinct elements that comprise citizens' experience of ballot propositions.

Conclusion

In this paper we laid out three alternative views of the impact of direct democracy on voters' civic orientations. One view argues that direct democracy restores the people's faith in their ability to have the final say in shaping government policy. A second, more pessimistic view, believes that direct democracy, while a promising idea, fails in reality to promote citizens' belief in their own competence. A third view, which we developed here as a more nuanced alternative, predicts that either result is possible, with the outcome contingent on the nature of the propositional environment, especially the salience of propositions. Salience, it seems to us, works through two mechanisms: inherent interest and publicity.

We tested all three alternative views with a dataset merging individual civic orientations from the 1998 NES with state-level characteristics, including measures of the propositional environment. We found that propositions per se do nothing for—or against—civic orientations. The salience of propositions,

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efficacy is negative, while at high levels of publicity, greater inherent interest is associated with higher efficacy. This pattern is theoretically cogent, but the coefficients rarely attain statistical significance. When we have additional data available (for other years' elections) we will be better able to estimate these effects.

however, affects civic orientations at a substantial magnitude. Specifically, state-specific news coverage of propositions, our measure of publicity, increases internal efficacy—voters' sense that they can make sense of and have a say in matters of politics—while national news coverage of state propositions, our measure of inherent interest, increases voters' interest in the campaign.

Providing discriminant validity and further substantive insights are null results for the impact of either of these measures on political trust and especially on general interest in politics. Salient propositions do not have a scattershot impact on distant, general civic orientations, only on those that immediately follow from the opportunity to have a say on the issues of the day. Direct democracy provokes interest not in all matters of politics, but specifically in the campaign at hand. And while some early advocates of direct democracy, most notably Woodrow Wilson, believed that it would restore citizens' faith in representative government, the results indicate otherwise. Direct democracy restores citizens' faith in themselves but not in their elected officials; indeed, it may well promote citizens' sense that they have successfully circumvented their elected representatives.

Puzzling to us is the null finding for the mediating impact of exposure to news. We expected that the effect of publicity would be all the more powerful among voters who consume more news (measured either with questions about exposure or with political sophistication). However, we found no evidence for this hypothesis. We intend to pursue it further in the next phase of the project.

Our analysis here is restricted to 1998, raising questions about the consistency of the findings across elections. Accordingly, we are in the process of adding data from previous off-year elections.[20]

In future work, we intend to pursue further the question of mechanisms. Here we have identified publicity and inherent interest as the paths that link salient propositions to civic orientations. We have further unpacked publicity into three distinct mechanisms: policy-specific information, partisan and ideological cues, and a general reminder about the availability of opportunities for citizens to have a say. The impact of direct democracy could rest much more on one of these than on the others, and we hope to develop measures that will allow us to distinguish among them.

In addition, we have utterly neglected the impact of supporting winning rather than losing propositions. It is possible that voters' efficacy rises higher when they not only believe they could have a say but when they succeed in having a say. Conversely, when voters continually support the losing side, the impact of direct democracy could turn negative.[21] We have also neglected the content area of propositions, yet it is possible that the content matters. For example, perhaps propositions that restrict civil rights (which are also more likely to pass than the average proposition) decrease efficacy among African Americans as they raise it among many whites.

Finally, we have neglected here the question of voting. What is the relationship of voting, efficacy, and propositions? This we find to be a difficult web to untangle, in part because of the reciprocal relationship between voting and efficacy. We might expect propositions to enhance the impact of efficacy

[20] We have chosen to focus first on off-year elections because Smith (2001) shows that citizens' responses to state propositions are greater in off-year than in presidential-year elections.

[21] This requires a strategy for identifying the supporters and opponents of specific propositions. Further, it is unclear how to aggregate successful and failed propositions into a measure of overall success or failure.

on turnout, since efficacy is often among the determinants of voting. Alternatively, we might expect the impact of propositions on efficacy to be enhanced for those who actually take the opportunity to have a say and go to the polls. In fact, we find considerable support for this hypothesis (results not reported), but the problem of reciprocity makes a definitive interpretation difficult. We are, at this time, considering how it might be done.

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Table 1
Propositions, Per Se, Do Not Stimulate Political Efficacy

	Proposition Measures (see below for definitions)			
	Proposition in 1998 (Y/N)	**# of Props '98**	**Initiative State (Y/N)**	**Ave # of of Inits**
How much attention does govt pay people?				
Unstandardized OLS Coeff	.028	.003	-.034	-.023
(Standard Errors)	(.032)	(.042)	(.027)	(.055)
Elections make govt pay attention?				
Unstandardized OLS Coeff	-.007	.008	-.017	.033
(Standard Errors)	(.032)	(.042)	(.027)	(.054)
Politics are too compli-cated for people like me				
Unstandardized OLS Coeff	.023	.028	.001	.017
(Standard Errors)	(.027)	(.036)	(.024)	(.047)
Public officials don't care about people like me				
Unstandardized OLS Coeff	-.008	.005	.006	.017
(Standard Errors)	(.025)	(.034)	(.022)	(.044)
People like me don't have any say in govt				
Unstandardized OLS Coeff	.038	.023	-.047	.005
(Standard Errors)	(.029)	(.039)	(.025)	(.050)
Efficacy Scale (5 items)				
Unstandardized OLS Coeff	.016	.014	-.017	.005
(Standard Errors)	(.019)	(.025)	(.016)	(.033)

**p < .01 *p < .05

NOTES: In regressions, Ns range from 1194 to 1208. OLS equations include controls for: family income, age, region of residence, race (black/non-black), Hispanic ethnicity, education, sex, and measures of state context (% white, % black, median income, % with college degrees, and party balance in state legislature). All variables have been scored to range between 0 and 1.

Proposition in 1998 (Y/N): Does respondent live in state with at least one proposition on 1998 ballot? **# of Props '98:** Number of propositions on ballot in respondent's state in 1998 regardless of source. **Initiative State (Y/N)**: Does respondent live in a state with initiative process? **Ave. # of Inits**: Average number of initiatives on ballot per election cycle since respondent's state adopted initiative process.

Table 2
Media Coverage of Propositions Does Appear to Stimulate Political Efficacy

	Media Coverage Measures (see below for definitions)	
	Nat'l Newspaper Coverage	**State Newspaper Coverage**
How much attention does govt pay people?		
Unstandardized OLS Coeff	.023	.057
(Standard Errors)	(.053)	(.052)
Elections make govt pay attention?		
Unstandardized OLS Coeff	-.046	.056
(Standard Errors)	(.053)	(.052)
Public officials don't care about people like me		
Unstandardized OLS Coeff	-.003	-.002
(Standard Errors)	(.043)	(.042)
Politics are too compli-cated for people like me		
Unstandardized OLS Coeff	.014	.095*
(Standard Errors)	(.046)	(.045)
People like me don't have any say in govt		
Unstandardized OLS Coeff	.037	.124**
(Standard Errors)	(.049)	(.048)
Efficacy Scale (5 items)		
Unstandardized OLS Coeff	.008	.064*
(Standard Errors)	(.032)	(.031)

**p < .01 *p < .05

NOTES: In regressions, Ns range from 1194 to 1208. OLS equations include controls for: family income, age, region of residence, race (black/non-black), Hispanic ethnicity, education, sex, and measures of state context (% white, % black, median income, % with college degrees, and party balance in state legislature). All variables have been scored to range between 0 and 1.

Nat'l Newspaper Coverage: How frequently was any proposition from respondent's state mentioned in national newspaper accounts of the election. Newspapers include *New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and *USA Today*. **State Newspaper Coverage:** What percentage of respondent's state newspaper coverage of the election is devoted to propositions?

Table 3
Media Coverage Variables Hold Up in Test of Discriminant Validity

	Media Coverage Measures (see below for definitions)	
	Nat'l Newspaper Coverage	**State Newspaper Coverage**
How often does govt do what is right?		
Unstandardized OLS Coeff	.030	.028
(Standard Errors)	(.031)	(.030)
General interest in public affairs		
Unstandardized OLS Coeff	.058	.019
(Standard Errors)	(.046)	(.045)
Care about who wins House race		
Unstandardized OLS Coeff	.035	-.022
(Standard Errors)	(.048)	(.047)
Interest in 1998 campaigns		
Unstandardized OLS Coeff	.179**	.050
(Standard Errors)	(.053)	(.051)

**p < .01 *p < .05

NOTES: In regressions, Ns range from 1178 to 1212. OLS equations include controls for: family income, age, region of residence, race (black/non-black), Hispanic ethnicity, education, sex, and measures of state context (% white, % black, median income, % with college degrees, and party balance in state legislature). Additionally, two variables tapping whether or not there was a gubernatorial or senatorial race in the state were added to the interest equations. All variables have been scored to range between 0 and 1.

Appendix 1

States Represented in the 1998 National Election Study

State	Prop. State?	Initiative State?	# of Props '98	# of Nat'l Mentions	% of Local Coverage
Alabama	Y	N	11	1	0
California	Y	Y	12	10	43
Colorado	Y	Y	11	7	44
Connecticut	N	N	0	0	0
Florida	Y	Y	13	1	20
Georgia	Y	N	10	0	0
Illinois	Y	Y	0	0	0
Indiana	Y	N	2	0	0
Iowa	Y	N	2	1	11
Maryland	N	N	0	0	0
Massachusetts	Y	Y	4	4	33
Michigan	Y	Y	3	4	0
Minnesota	Y	N	3	0	17
Missouri	Y	Y	2	4	0
New Hampshire	Y	N	2	0	0
New Jersey	Y	N	3	1	14
New Mexico	Y	N	10	0	0
New York	N	N	0	0	0
Ohio	Y	N	3	1	0
Oregon	Y	Y	13	6	32
Pennsylvania	Y	Y	2	0	0
Tennessee	N	N	0	0	0
Texas	N	N	0	0	0
Utah	Y	Y	6	0	35
Virginia	Y	N	5	0	31
Washington	Y	Y	5	11	29
Wisconsin	Y	N	1	0	20

NOTE: The 1998 NES only samples in these 27 states. See Table 1 for variable descriptions.

Appendix 2
Full Results for Table 2
(Dependent Variable: Efficacy Scale)

	Unstan Coeff. (S.E.)	Stan Coeff.	Unstan Coeff. (S.E.)	Stan Coeff.
Nat'l Newspaper Coverage	.008 (.032)	.011		
State Newspaper Coverage			.064 (.031)	.105
Political Balance in State	.021 (.038)	.019	-.003 (.039)	-.003
Percent White	-.023 (.031)	-.029	-.058 (.036)	-.075
Percent Black	-.013 (.047)	-.017	-.002 (.046)	-.003
Percent College	-.041 (.050)	-.053	-.055 (.050)	-.071
Median State Income	.080 (.048)	.088	.044 (.051)	.048
Midwest Dummy	.034 (.022)	.071	.031 (.022)	.066
West Dummy	.039 (.039)	.076	.004 (.038)	.007
South Dummy	.055 (.031)	.125	.032 (.033)	.074
Years of Educ.	.349 (.044)	.244	.344 (.044)	.241
Female	-.030 (.012)	-.071	-.030 (.012)	-.071
Age	-.012 (.027)	-.013	-.009 (.027)	-.009
Black	-.001 (.020)	-.001	-.001 (.020)	-.002
Hispanic	.007 (.022)	.010	.008 (.022)	.012
Family Income	.046 (.021)	.068	.049 (.021)	.072
Constant	.142 (.063)		.197 (.067)	
N/Adj R^2	1194/ .084		1194/ .087	