

Mixed opinions about usefulness of ballot initiatives

By Daniel B. Wood, Christian Science Monitor

LOS ANGELES – Is the initiative process an invaluable tool that holds legislators to account and allows voters to take on the monied interests that dominate politics? Or has it become a tool of those special interests themselves, confusing voters and making states an ungovernable mess?

Opinions on the ballot initiative process in America vary widely, but California – which has passed more initiatives than any other state except Oregon – has been perhaps the nation's most important laboratory for direct democracy.

In California's experience, both the good and the bad are apparent.

In recent years, many political analysts have come to see the initiative process as broken.

“Originally, the initiative process was to be a safety valve to allow citizens to go around the legislature held in thrall by special interests,” says Sherry Jeffe, a senior fellow at the School of Policy, Planning, and Development at USC. “What it has become is another tool of special interests to get what they want by buying it from the public or pressuring the legislature, by just threatening to file an initiative to get them to move.”

She says a handful of key initiatives have made governing the state far more difficult:

- Proposition 13, which in 1978 put a cap on the annual increase in property-tax rates, resulted in localities having

huge budget shortfalls that must be backfilled by the state.

- Proposition 98 in 1988 required a minimum percentage of the state budget to be spent on K-12 education, tying legislators' hands.
- Proposition 140 in 1990 created term limits on legislators, which forces them to leave just as many are beginning to understand how lawmaking works.

The sheer number of initiatives can also be confusing.

"This is overwhelming to me, and I do this for a living," says Barbara O'Connor, director emeritus of the Institute for Study of Politics and Media at CSU Sacramento. "But the average Californian doesn't like government and is not apt to spend time sorting through all the complicated issue pamphlets."

Yet John Matsusaka, president of the Initiative and Referendum Institute at USC, decided to study the history of 111 initiatives in California since 1912, asking the question: "Have voter initiatives paralyzed the California budget?"

His conclusion: "Contrary to the claims of many pundits, voter initiatives have not constrained the California budget to the extent that fiscal crises are inevitable."

Michael Shires, a professor of public policy at Pepperdine University, acknowledges that initiatives "have complicated finance" but adds: "They are one of the most important parts of our political system."

Others agree. "Without the initiative process, we wouldn't have a redistricting commission, political reform such as lobbyist disclosure, ethics laws, a tough enforcement commission, and a chance to repeal the death penalty," says Robert Stern, former president of the Center for Governmental Studies.

Hal Dash, a Democratic consultant, can see both sides. "The

initiative process has helped to fund schools, housing for veterans, medical research, and other good things,” he says. “But too often initiatives are the end result of the failure of government to do what we all elected them to do – make the tough decisions for the good of all Californians.”