

Initiative Petition Impacts

What are the impacts of initiative petitions on policy?

Initiative petitions cause some policies to align more with majority opinion.

Most of the research investigating the effects of ballot initiatives and referendums was conducted before recent methods were developed ([Matusaka, 2017](#)). Older research describes relationships between policies and the initiative petition process, but cannot definitively say that initiative petitions cause a certain outcome (e.g., higher state spending). However, recent research using newer data analysis methods has generally reinforced previous findings.

Alignment of Initiative Measures with the Public. There is not enough policy-specific public opinion data to determine if, in general, states with initiative petitions pass laws that align with majority voter opinion more often ([Matusaka, 2017](#)). Existing research suggests that, for some policies (e.g., the death penalty, same-sex marriage, and term limits), states with initiatives pass laws that align with the majority opinion 11-19% more than states without initiatives ([Matusaka, 2010](#); [Lax, 2011](#)). For other policies, states with initiative petition do not align with majority opinion any more frequently. It is not understood why some policies and not others are more likely to align with majority



Research Highlights

The clearest difference between states with and without initiative petitions is whether or not they enact term limits.

Between 1960-2009, states with initiative petitions spent and taxed about 5% less than states without initiative petitions and passed more conservative policies.

Ballot measure committees that supported or opposed ballot measures nationwide received \$1.2 billion in contributions in 2020.

opinion in initiative petition states.

Influence of Money. Ballot measure committees, organizations that support or oppose ballot measures, received \$1.2 billion nationwide in contributions in 2020 ([FTM, n.d.](#)). Recent research finds that spending in support or against ballot measures has strong effects on outcomes ([Stratmann, 2006](#); [Figueiredo, 2011](#); [Smith, 2007](#)). Committees that supported or opposed ballot measures in Missouri spent \$1.9 million in 2020 and \$3.2 million in 2018 ([MEC, n.d.](#)).

A 2022 working paper suggests that large spending by corporations does not result in significant amounts of favorable legislation being passed ([Matusaka, 2018](#)). More initiatives are introduced that do not align with business interests (e.g., regulations on nuclear power plants and radioactive waste, usury laws, tobacco and smoking bans) than those that do align with business interests, and therefore most business spending is against the passage of an initiative petition. For example, an analysis of California initiatives from 2000-2016 showed

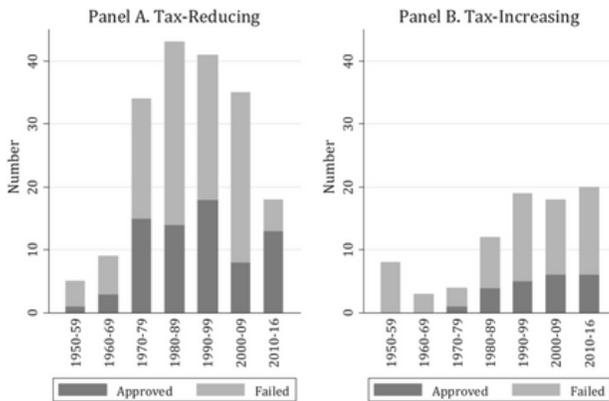


Figure 1. The number of tax-reducing (panel A) and tax increasing (panel B) initiatives in America over time (Matsusaka, 2017).

that business groups oppose initiatives more often than they support them.

The strongest effect of initiative petitions is on term limits.

Fiscal Policy. Since the 1950s, more initiatives have passed that reduce taxes than increase them (Figure 1).

- Based on data from 1960–2002, states with initiatives overall spend and tax about 5% less than states without an initiative process (Matsusaka, 2017).
- States and cities with initiatives raise less money from taxes but raise more money from fees and charges for services.

There is no significant difference in the debts and deficits between initiative and non-initiative states.

Social Policy. Studies on initiative states from 1989–2009 found that they are more likely to adopt conservative social policies (Matsusaka, 2017). These include laws on parental notification of abortions by minors, more restrictive abortion rules, capital punishment, bans on same-sex marriage, and declarations of English as the official language. On a set of

eight social policy issues including the issues listed above, initiative states were 12% more likely to favor a conservative policy (Matsusaka, 2017). However, it is not clear why more conservative policies were adopted. There have not been more recent studies to see if this trend has continued.

Government and Elections. The strongest finding of the effect of the initiative process on the state government and electoral process is with regard to term limits.

In the 1990s, 21 of the 24 initiative states implemented Congressional legislative term limits by initiative petition (Matsusaka, 2017). Only two of the 26 non-initiative states adopted term limits in the same time period. The Supreme Court later reversed these decisions, ruling that states cannot impose federal legislative term limits.

Of the 16 states that currently have term limits for state legislators, 15 were initiative petition states at the time term limits were enacted including Missouri (NCSL, 2020; NCSL, 2022). Opinion polls show there is majority support for term limits in all states, so this difference cannot be explained by preferential differences between states (Matsusaka, 2017).

Research is inconclusive on the effects of initiative petitions on elections laws (Matsusaka, 2017). For more information on state legislative term limits, see our Science Notes: [Retaining Institutional Knowledge in the State Legislature](#) and [Term Limits for State Legislators](#).

For more information on the initiative petition process see our Science Note: [The Initiative Petition Process](#)