

COMMENTARY

Voter Distaste for Sacramento Could Sink Education Initiatives

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California voters understand that their schools are in trouble. Forty-two percent of voters give the state's schools a grade of D or F, while fewer than 15 percent give them an A or B. Fifty-seven percent of voters believe that California schools have gotten worse in the past few years, and only 7 percent believe that they have gotten better.

Voters also recognize that their schools are not adequately funded. More than 40 percent rate the state's efforts to provide "adequate funding for local schools, students and classrooms" at 3 or below on a 10-point scale, with 47 percent of Republicans and 49 percent of "decline to state" voters sharing this view. Only 19 percent of voters (16 percent of Republicans, 15 percent of DTS) give the state a score of 7 or higher. Democrats, surprisingly, are somewhat more cheerful about school funding, with 27 percent giving the state a rating of 7 or higher and only 32 percent a rating of 3 or lower.

These findings come from a [recent poll](#) sponsored by Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) and the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California. Taken together they might lead one to predict smooth sailing for the two initiatives on the November ballot that aim to increase funding for California's schools, but in fact the seas are rough and storm clouds are gathering. Why?

The PACE/Rossier poll helps to explain the political headwinds facing the two initiatives. Our poll was conducted on-line, which makes it possible to provide respondents with a great deal of information in a variety of formats. We took full advantage of this in our polling on Proposition 30, asking voters about their support for Governor Brown's initiative in three different ways.

First, as a telephone poll might do, we presented them with the ballot language provided by the Attorney General's office, including the Ballot Label, Official Title and Summary of the Proposition. After reading the ballot language 55 percent of voters expressed support for Proposition 30, while 36 percent expressed opposition.

Next, we presented them with public advertisements supporting and opposing Proposition 30. Exposure to political ads did not shift voters' opinions much: support for Proposition 30 declined from 54 to 52 percent, but opposition also declined, from 36 to 34 percent.

Finally, we presented voters with two statements of equal length summarizing the value propositions that drive arguments for and against Proposition 30.

The first read as follows:



Supporters of Proposition 30 say that after years of deficit spending, Governor Brown has cut billions in spending. We have made progress but we still have serious budget problems. We should take a stand against further budget cuts to schools and public safety, make the wealthy pay their fair share, and help balance the budget.”

The second statement read:



Opponents of Proposition 30 say that Sacramento politicians need to cut wasteful spending before raising our taxes. The State Legislature just voted to spend billions of dollars on a high-speed train to nowhere, raised salaries for their senior staff, and just found millions of dollars in unspent funds.”

We asked voters which of these two statements best reflected their views. Thirty-seven percent chose the argument put forward by supporters of Proposition 30, while 47 percent chose the opponents’ argument.

The fundamental danger for those seeking additional funding for schools lies here, in California voters’ deep and persistent skepticism about whether the state can be trusted to use resources well. As a recent [PPIC report](#) confirms, voters distrust politicians and believe that a large share of public spending is wasted, in education as in other sectors. Persuading them that more educational spending will lead to better outcomes for students is a huge political challenge.

The challenge is exacerbated this November by the increasingly rancorous debate between supporters of Proposition 30 and supporters of Proposition 38 about which initiative is better for California schools. The supporters of Proposition 38 have designed their proposal and framed their advertising to reinforce rather than confront the public’s doubts about whether the state can be trusted to spend money wisely. Their promise to keep new revenues out of the hands of “Sacramento politicians” clearly resonates with California voters, but not in a positive way. Instead, by playing to voters’ distaste for politics and public spending their campaign is very likely to sink both initiatives, with consequences for the state’s education system that are fearsome to contemplate.

Californians are plainly concerned about the condition of the state’s schools. They have a reasonably clear idea about what’s needed to move the state’s education system in a better direction, and they recognize that making progress is likely to require more money for schools. For now, though, they lack confidence that educational improvement is an achievable goal. On November 6 it seems increasingly likely that they will prove themselves right.

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