Seasonal initiatives: Sports stadium referendums and voter turnout

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Sensational Initiatives: Sports Stadium Referendums and Voter Turnout

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By

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Democracy is a system of government in which the people of a state govern themselves under the idea that every person's vote and opinion is equal in the eyes of the government. In its purest form, a democratic government involves all citizens equally in every level of administration. The United States government was founded on this belief that citizens deserve the right to govern themselves, but the system created by the founders of this country was a form of representative democracy. Rebelling against the British monarchy, which would not allow the American colonies a voice in Parliament, the founders of this country created a system of government that allowed its voters to elect citizens who would represent them in the executive and legislative branches of the federal government. As this country has grown and changed during its 225 years of existence, several modifications to representative democracy have been introduced. These modifications either claim to better represent the voters, or they claim to make the representative democracy of this country a more pure form of democracy. One revision of representative democracy geared toward making American democracy more pure that has been introduced and used for over 100 years is the initiative, a system of allowing voters to propose and pass a law while bypassing state legislatures. One of the main arguments made for the initiative is that it increases voter turnout. Although initiatives do not increase turnout across the board, certain sensational issues do increase turnout. An example of a sensational issue that increases voter turnout that will be addressed in this paper is a bond issue intended to build a sports stadium. This paper will examine the initiative issue in terms of its history, its impact on democracy, and specifically its impact on voter turnout in sports stadium referendums.
The Initiative, its History, and its Impact on Democracy

The word “initiative” is a blanket term that covers any type of citizen sponsored and ratified legislation. Although there is no provision in the Constitution for a national initiative, several states have installed the process in their governments. Each state has its own process for initiating legislature, but these processes tend to follow similar steps. The first step in initiating legislation is, of course, recognizing the desire to make or change a law that will not be changed by the state legislature. Second, the idea must be drafted into a proposed law. This step is the most important in the initiative process because the draft must precisely follow all rules outlined by the state government for initiating legislation. Most initiative writers have legal aid when drafting to avoid having the initiative nullified by the state government. The next step is organizing a petition drive to secure the initiative a place on the ballot. The signature requirement for the petition stage of this process is usually based on the preceding election’s turnout. Usually a number between three and six percent of the voters who voted in the previous election is required to place an initiative on the ballot. This number shows that there is substantial support for the bill but also allows for a small organization to gain the needed amount of signatures to put the bill on the ballot. Finally, the final draft of the bill and the required amount of signatures on the petition must be turned in to the election office by the deadline, usually one year after the first draft is submitted.¹

The roots of the initiative in the United States lie in the Populist movement of the late 19th century. Populism was a strand of political thought that believed in returning political power to the people. Populists stressed that state legislatures and the judicial

system were corrupt, and that new systems of government should be implemented to return power to the people. People who felt cheated by their government and who believed that important decisions were made in smoke filled rooms with lots of money changing hands had great faith in the ability of common citizens to govern themselves. The Populists, and later the Progressives in early 20th century America, went so far as to assume that citizens could determine public policy in every municipality in the country, leaving only the administrative tasks to the bureaucracy. Consequently, when the idea of direct legislation was introduced to the United States from Switzerland by James W. Sullivan, members of the Populist party jumped at the opportunity to make it part of their platform.

Populism was centered mostly in the western states of the country, where farmers, caught in a series of poor yields and markets, believed its policies would benefit them. Nebraska Senator and four-time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan said of initiative and referendums: “I know of nothing that will do more than I&R to restore government to the hands of the people and keep it within their control.” Therefore, it is easy to understand why, except for Kansas, Texas, New Mexico, and Hawaii, every state west of the Missouri River, and eight states east of the Missouri River, have a provision in their state constitution that allows for statewide initiatives. Although only 23 states have this provision, every state but Delaware, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin have provisions in their constitutions that allow for

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3 Schmidt, 249.
4 Ibid., 5-11.
initiatives and referendums at the municipal level. While Populist support calling for the creation of the initiative process in every state and on the national level failed, a substantial number of states adopted the initiative in some form, and many use it regularly as a part of their political process.

There are several arguments for and against the initiative as a form of legislation. David D. Schmidt, a major supporter of direct legislation, outlines several arguments that have been used since the inception of the initiative in the United States. One argument for direct legislation is that it creates a more accountable government through its ability to bypass the legislature when it does not respond to the people. Second, initiatives allow for greater citizen participation in the political process beyond the voting booth: initiative campaigns involve thousands of volunteers who see results of their effort in the political process. Initiatives also create a better-informed electorate and a safeguard against concentrating power in the hands of a few. Schmidt discusses the problems of campaign spending, political action committees, special interest groups, pork barrel legislation, under representative representatives, and legislators’ arrogance as detrimental to the legislative process. He views the initiative as a remedy to these problems as well as an opportunity to involve citizens more in their government.

Other scholars like David B. Magleby outline several arguments against direct legislation. He argues that the real beneficiaries of direct legislation are the special interests that support the legislation. Initiatives will also complicate the ballot and the voting process with frivolous legislation. Further, Magleby argues that voters are ill equipped or apathetic when it comes to understanding complicated proposals and

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5 Ibid., 217-277.
6 Ibid., 26-34.
campaigns involved in the initiative process, and that direct legislation will not educate these voters or increase their participation. Finally, Magleby harkens back to the ideas of the founders when they created a representative democracy and argues that direct legislation will endanger democracy and undermine representative government, and that the legislative process is a better way to make public policy.\textsuperscript{7} James Madison, in Federalist 10, warns against giving too much power to the people. He argues that a faction made up of a majority of the people can exercise its will freely in a direct democracy, and that representative democracy is the cure for this situation. If a majority is given power to directly govern a state, it will become a tyranny against the minority and thus eliminate the principles of democracy.\textsuperscript{8}

Although both sides of the initiative argument present strong cases, only one topic raised by both sides will be tested in this paper. That topic is whether or not direct legislation increases voter turnout. James S. Fishkin asserts that, although initiative and referendum use has increased in recent years, voter turnout has not, and has even decreased in some cases.\textsuperscript{9} David H. Everson points out the logical argument supporting initiatives: many voters see little connection between their votes and policy outcomes. Therefore, there is little incentive for them to vote. However, if citizens were allowed to vote directly on issues and policy, the incentive to participate would be much clearer and initiatives would increase voter turnout. Based on this assumption, Everson studied voter turnout in initiative elections from 1960–1978. The results show that in all elections during this time period, there is a consistent advantage in turnout in initiative states.

\textsuperscript{7} Magleby, 29-30.
versus non-initiative states. These results are misleading however, because they do not take into account the voting patterns of different parts of the country.¹⁰

To understand the significance of these results, it is helpful to recognize how different parts of the country vote. Daniel J. Elazar studied what he calls the political culture of America and categorized the political ideology of the country in three groups: moralistic, traditionalistic, and individualistic. The moralistic political culture views politics as a tool for bettering the commonwealth and as a civic duty of the people of the commonwealth. Political participation is viewed as necessary and positive in this political culture. The traditionalistic political culture believes that government should play a limited role in the life of its citizens, whose first duty is to themselves. Traditionalist society is made up of a well-established hierarchy, and members of that society tend to be anti-bureaucratic because bureaucracy by its nature interferes with that social structure. The individualistic political culture views politics as one of many ways to improve one’s lot in society. Government action should be restricted to the areas that encourage individual strength and accomplishment. According to Elazar, the moralistic and individualistic political cultures are very strong in the northern and western United States, while the traditionalistic political culture is concentrated in the south. This hypothesis suggests that more emphasis is placed on political participation in the north and west, in the same region where Populism dominated the political scene 100 years ago and where initiative use is most frequent. Also, less emphasis is placed on participation in the south.¹¹

Elazar’s study of political culture will help make Everson’s findings more clear. Everson’s study found that voter turnout was higher in states with initiatives than in states without, but then he modified the study and left the southern states (with a history of low political participation) out and re-examined the relationship of the initiative to voter turnout. The results of this study show that voter turnout was actually higher in non-initiative states than in initiative states. The evidence from this study reveals that direct legislation does not increase voter turnout across the board.  

**Sensational Initiatives and Sports Stadiums**

While the Everson study implies that initiatives have no impact on voter turnout compared to national averages, it does not prove that every initiative is ineffective in increasing turnout. Several scholars, including Everson, Fishkin, Schmidt, and Magleby, argue that certain initiatives generate enough attention that they do increase turnout.  

In fact, several initiatives have drawn a great amount of popular attention through the years. For example, in 1978, a highly disputed right-to-work constitutional initiative in Missouri increased voter turnout from 38 percent in 1974 to 46 percent in 1978. A second example where voter turnout increased dramatically is the case of Proposition 13 in California in 1978. Proposition 13 was an attempt to place a 1% lid on property taxes in the state, and it generated so much controversy that one-half million more voters turned out for the initiative vote than for the previous primary election. Massive “Vote No” or “Vote Yes” campaigns, newspaper, television, and radio ads, and community-organized

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12 Ibid., 422.
13 Everson, 424; Fishkin, 76-77; Schmidt, 26-27; and Magleby, 96.
14 Everson, 417-418.
rallies contribute to the sensationalism surrounding certain initiatives and increase voter participation in the issue.  

Although Everson’s study indicates that initiatives do not increase voter turnout compared to the national average, individual initiatives that are controversial, widespread in their effects, or that are captured by the media do increase voter turnout. Therefore, while initiatives such as those attempting to reform the internal rules of the state legislature, change requirements for bond approval in counties, or legalize pari-mutuel betting tend to follow the pattern proven in David H. Everson’s studies, issues like Proposition 13, which find the media spotlight, break from that mold and dramatically affect voter turnout.

Certain types of issues are significant enough to have a dramatic impact on turnout. Influential initiatives tend to revolve around issues like constitutional rights and the spending of public money. Bonds for sports stadiums are an example of a sensational issue that has an impact on voter turnout. Stadiums, which mirror a city’s level of interest and ability to generate income from sports teams, can become very controversial issues in local politics. Depending on one’s position in the community, individual citizens may be strongly for or against the bond issue. Team owners want the new revenue sources that accompany stadiums, while local interests want the “direct, indirect, and psychic values” that accompany their sports teams. Individual citizens take a positive stand on the issue either because of their ties to “their” team or a negative stand because of their lack of interest in spending public money for a stadium or their lack of

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15 Schmidt, 132.
enthusiasm for increasing taxes in general. The stadium issue may also polarize the major institutions in the community. Local businesses are attracted to the new revenues generated by fans near and far who come to the stadium for sports, concerts, and other events; and the new stadium represents one possible increased income. Local government officials are often torn between trying to increase revenue and tourism for the city while keeping taxes low for the citizens. Finally, big businesses are usually involved in ownership of either the team or the old stadium being replaced. Taxation, business, and the preferences of individual citizens are all issues involved when an initiative for spending public money to build a stadium is placed on the ballot.

In the modern era of big business in the sports world where the expenses of salaries, advertising, and promotions tend to exceed revenues, owners of sports franchises are looking for different ways to raise money to build new stadiums. Because building a sports stadium is generally considered to be a part of the revitalization of the American city, and revitalizing big, old American cities has recently become a priority of city governments, owners make the argument that public money should finance the new stadium because it provides a service to the city. Cities will go to great lengths, including sponsoring the entire funding of the stadium, to either secure or keep a professional sports team because of its economic, emotional, and tourism impact on the community. A strategic owner may want to tap into public support for a stadium by proposing an initiative. This approach effectively forces the local government to allocate the funds needed to build the stadium. Consequently, the initiative process starts, and the sports stadium bond then becomes a sensational issue that will increase voter turnout.

The Ballpark at Arlington

The case study chosen for testing the thesis outlined in this paper was the initiative that created the funding for The Ballpark at Arlington, the home stadium of the Texas Rangers in Arlington, Texas. Arlington provided a model test case because of the use of a sales tax initiative to provide the funding for the stadium, the relatively recent vote on the stadium initiative, and the compatibility of the data used to compare the stadium initiative to other initiatives in the city. The city of Arlington organized an initiative that called for a one-half cent sales tax increase to go toward building the $191 million dollar Ballpark. The initiative went to a vote on January 1, 1991, and 33,860 voters turned out. Incidentally, the initiative passed by 10,000 votes, and construction of the stadium was completed by the start of the 1994 season.

In comparison, the next sales tax initiative held in Arlington occurred in 1998. On May 2, the city held an election that consisted of voting for city council and school board members, as well as a proposition for a proposed sales tax increase that would generate $165 million to create a Smithsonian-affiliated museum and a watershed for Johnson’s Creek. This was the first sales tax initiative since 1991 and the proposition for The Ballpark, and voter turnout was drastically lower. For the 1998 initiative, 15,748 citizens voted, less than half of the turnout for the Ballpark initiative. According to school district Superintendent Mac Bernd, “Arlington voters are very discriminatory and thoughtful and decide each proposal on its own merit.” The Arlington Star-Telegram,

18 Fort, 16.
19 Kimberly Durnan and Colleen McCain, “Creek proposal fails; cost, time frame motivate project’s opponents,” Arlington Star-Telegram, 16 January 2000, 1.
after covering the Johnson’s Creek initiative, also reported: “[T]he highest turnout for a city election in recent memory was for the sales tax increase that funded the construction of The Ballpark in Arlington, which attracted 33,860 voters. The Johnson’s Creek initiative was repeated in January 2000, and voter turnout was even lower than the 1998 election.

The results of the comparison between the Ballpark initiative and the Johnson’s Creek initiative reveal that, while voter turnout was lackluster for the museum initiative, The Ballpark at Arlington proved to be a sensational issue that increased voter turnout. The next obvious steps that could be taken in this research involve comparing the Ballpark initiative to voter turnout in similar situations in a general election in Arlington, as well as researching similar cases in different cities with sports stadiums to see if the results are consistent with the thesis presented in this paper. Nevertheless, in this case the results support the thesis that sports stadium referendums fit the pattern of sensational cases that increase voter turnout.

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20 Durnan and McCain.
Bibliography

Duman, Kimberly and Colleen McCain, “Creek proposal fails; cost, time frame motivate project’s opponents.” Arlington Star-Telegram 16 January 2000, 1.


