



By Linda K. Breggin

Ballot Measures All Over the Map

In the November elections, states across the country gave citizens the opportunity to vote on environmental and energy ballot measures. The results were mixed. While voters rejected two high profile measures, many others passed — often by large margins. The topics ranged widely from renewable energy to fishing restrictions. Perhaps most notable is the impressive amount of money special interests poured into key ballot campaigns — and how that investment appears to have paid off.

Before a tally, a quick civics refresher. There are several types of ballot measures that allow voters to speak directly rather than through elected representatives. Virtually all states have some type of legislative process for placing issues on the ballot, but only some authorize popular referenda and initiatives. According to the Initiative and Referenda Institute, 24 states allow “popular referenda,” started by citizen petitions, to strike down legislative measures. The same number of states authorize petition-driven “initiatives” for new laws and constitutional amendments.

One of the most hotly contested initiatives was a Michigan constitutional amendment requiring utilities to provide at least 25 percent of annual electricity retail sales from renewable energy sources by 2025. Although the proposal provided for extensions if utility rates would increase by more than 1 percent, voters defeated the measure by

a wide margin. *Climatewire* reports that Michigan’s two largest electric utilities each contributed \$11 million to the opposition, which in total raised roughly \$24 million. Supporters raised half that amount.

In contrast, voters in California approved by a large margin an initiative to change the way in which multistate businesses calculate California income tax liability — dedicating \$550 million annually of the anticipated revenue increase to energy efficiency projects and clean energy jobs. According to *Climatewire*, the ballot campaign was funded largely by a San Francisco investment manager, who contributed \$29.6 million of the \$31.3 million total raised in support of the measure. There was little opposition to the proposal, with opponents raising a meager \$45,000.

California voters did not embrace every environment-related measure. They rejected by roughly a margin of 53 percent to 46 percent a plan to require labeling of genetically modified foods. Opponents of the initiative, primarily food and biotech companies, contributed \$46 million to defeat the measure, whereas supporters, including organic and natural food companies, raised only \$9.2 million, according to the *New York Times*.

And, Alaskan voters defeated an ambitious proposal for a coastal management program that would have included standards and permits for project development. The opposition raised \$1.5 million to defeat the measure and supporters raised only \$200,000, according to the *Anchorage Daily News*.

Many ballot measures, however, attracted less attention, including several legislative referenda on bonds — all of which passed — often with no opposition money raised: Maine (\$5 million for land acquisition and \$7.9 million for drinking and wastewater infrastructure revolving loan fund); Rhode Island (\$12 million for water infrastructure

and \$20 million for open space acquisition, watershed restoration, and farmland development rights); and Oklahoma (up to \$300 million for a water resources and treatment reserve fund).

Similarly, referenda passed easily in Kentucky, Idaho, Nebraska, and Wyoming that establish a constitutional right-to-hunt, fish, or trap wildlife. And, Nebraska voters agreed to establish hunting as the preferred method of managing wildlife. In addition, North Dakota voters approved a right-to-farm-and-ranch measure.

An Oregon measure to address declining salmon populations in the Columbia River by prohibiting fishing with gillnets was defeated, in part because supporters stopped campaigning for the measure when the governor offered a regulatory compromise, according to the *Oregonian*. On the other hand, Alabama voters passed a legislative referendum, with virtually no money raised in opposition, to continue for 20 years the Forever Wild Land Trust, which acquires land for conservation and recreation.

Finally, an unusual proposal to give the state sovereignty over its natural resources, including the Grand Canyon, was rejected by Arizona voters. The

Arizona Daily Sun explained the measure was intended in part to “combat federal agencies which have stalled forest thinning projects and mining, often over environmental issues.” Only about \$6,000 was invested by opponents, but no contributions to support the measure were reported.

Local governments also were in the act with myriad ballot measures. For example, voters were presented with over 20 public-transit related measures in 12 states, two thirds of which passed, according to the Center for Transportation Excellence.

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Some referenda and initiatives passed, while others failed, as opposition varied