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RESEARCH NOTES

Support for Legislative Term Limitations in California: Group Representation, Partisanship, and Campaign Information

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This study uses opinion data to assess the basis of public support for California's term limit initiative (Proposition 140). We test if support was higher among members of demographic groups underrepresented in the state's legislature, if support displays a partisan bias, and if campaign contacts are associated with opinions. Ethnic and racial characteristics display little association with support; however women and younger voters were more supportive. Partisanship and campaign effects appear to have played an important role in shaping support for the initiative.

In November 1990, California became the third U.S. state to place limitations on the number of terms that members of the state legislature may serve, following earlier precedents set in Colorado and Oklahoma. In each of these states, term limitations were adopted through the citizen initiative process. In 1991, voters in the state of Washington rejected a similar initiative which would have placed limits on the state's congressional delegation (Olson 1992). In 1992, voters in 14 states approved proposals limiting terms for members of the U.S. Congress or state representatives. While attention has been directed at evaluating the constitutionality of (Fett and Ponder 1993) and normative rationale for these measures (Will 1992), little is known about the social and political bases of support for term limits. In this note we examine opinion poll data to identify the constituency supporting California's Proposition 140 of 1990. This initiative limits the tenure of members of the state legislature.

Research on term limits is developing as more states adopt these proposals (Benjamin and Malbin 1992). Existing empirical work offers a basis from which we can construct testable hypotheses about support for term limitations, particularly with respect to the changes that tenure limits might affect upon the composition of legislatures. Moncrief and his colleagues have estimated a model of cohort

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retention in state legislatures which suggests that limitations will affect a small proportion of members who might otherwise retain their seats in professional state legislatures (1992). In a related analysis, Moncrief and Thompson (1991) estimate how limitations might restructure group representation in legislative bodies, concluding that if limits were imposed, long-serving male incumbents would be likely to lose seats (with female representation increasing) and Democrats (the majority party in most state legislatures) would likely lose more seats than Republicans. It would be reasonable to expect similar consequences in California, since the legislature is highly professionalized (Squire 1992), predominantly Democratic, and predominantly male.[1]

The representational consequences of legislative term limitations have also been assessed with respect to the racial and ethnic compositions of legislative bodies. One potential effect of replacing incumbent legislators could be that racial groups overrepresented in an unlimited legislature might be replaced with members of underrepresented minority groups under conditions of open-seat elections. In California, for example, Hispanics and Asians are underrepresented in the legislature compared to their respective size in the electorate,[2] and they might gain representation as a result of rapid legislative turnover (Guerra 1991). A simulation of term limit induced cohort change in state legislatures finds that limits will not result in substantially increased representation of blacks since enforcement of the Voting Rights Act has resulted in districts producing roughly proportionate representation of blacks (Moncrief and Thompson 1991).[3]

Public Opinion and Term Limitations: Hypotheses

Less is known, however, about the congruence between expected consequences of these measures and factors associated with public support. The discussion above suggests a framework from which we may draw some testable hypotheses about public support for term limitations. If some voters evaluate term limit proposals with respect to expectations about the compositions of a post term limit body, we might expect that members of certain electoral groups would be more inclined to support limitations. This is not to say that we assume voters are strategic actors seeking to maximize representation of their respective group. Rather, we simply test if a term limitation proposition has more support among members of groups least represented by the status-quo legislature.

[1] In 1990, 16% of the California Assembly (lower house) were female, while 13% of state senators were female. Democrats held 58% of seats in the Assembly, and 64% of seats in the Senate while 49% of Californians were registered as Democrats.

[2] In 1990, 5% of Assembly and Senate members were Hispanic. There were no Asian members in either House. The 1990 census reported that 25% of California residents were of "Hispanic origin" and 9.6% were Asian.

[3] The 1990 census records that 7.5% of the state's residents were black and 7.5% of the Assembly were black, including Willie Brown, the speaker of the lower house. In 1990, 5% of Senate members were black.

The group-representation hypothesis requires that voters possess substantial information about the potential consequences of a ballot proposition. Such an assumption could be untenable. Ballot issue choices often demand that voters choose among competing propositions dealing with the same topic (Banducci 1992). The complexity of this process and limited information can affect the decision process (Magleby 1984; Zisk 1987). This causes many voters to utilize relatively low-cost information (Downs 1957) provided by proposition campaigns when making decisions (Magleby 1989).

Alternatives to the group-representation hypothesis recognize both the information demands associated with proposition choices and the potential for partisan/ideological attachments to structure opinions. The decision process in the California campaign was complicated by rival term limit proposals on the 1990 ballot. Proposition 140 was considered to be the more restrictive of the two measures, allowing half as much time in office as the rival measure. Proposition 140 was also described as a direct attack on professional legislative careers and the liberal Democratic leadership; it reduced the legislature's operating budgets and proposed cutting pension benefits and salaries for members (Fiorina 1992, 57; Price and Bacciocco 1990, 498). As such, Proposition 140 might have received greater support from self-described conservatives.

Partisanship also may define the constituency in favor of term limitations in California. The upper and lower houses of the California legislature had been dominated by Democrats through the 1980s, in spite of growing Republican registration and three successive elections (one of these a reelection) of Republican gubernatorial candidates.

Democratic strength in the legislature has been attributed, in part, to advantages derived from the 1980 legislative reapportionment process that left Democrats overrepresented in the state legislature (Bell and Price 1984, 206–8). Thus, tenure limitations might be viewed as advantageous to Republicans since most incumbents losing seats could be Democrats.

Since uncertainty is often associated with ballot propositions, campaign information may be more important for determining the outcome of ballot propositions than for candidate contests (Magleby 1989). Information can be received from multiple sources including targeted mailings from propositions campaigns, contact by political parties, and exposure to media. Thus, we might expect that opinions on the proposition were affected by exposure to campaign information.

Tests of Hypotheses: Group Representation, Partisanship, and Campaign Information

The discussion suggests three categories of individual-level factors likely to condition support for term limitations in California: demographic group membership, partisan attachments and ideological orientations, and exposure to campaign information. None of these categories constitute the basis for mutually exclusive hypotheses; we treat these as comparative rather than rival hypotheses.

For California, we define underrepresented groups to include women, Asians, and Hispanics (see note 2). Since these groups are relatively underrepresented in both houses of the state legislature (compared to their share of the state's population) the underrepresentation hypothesis suggests that individuals in these groups have weaker attachments to status-quo patterns of representation that term limits might disrupt. To these categories we also add age. The group representation perspective of support suggests that a generational effect may be in operation. In bald form this logic would imply that voters in the youngest age cohorts are less likely to find legislators drawn from their age group, and, as a result, they would have less attachment to maintaining the status quo. Any such generational effect may also reflect low attachment to political institutions among young voters similar to that manifest in low levels of voting and political participation (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

Data and Findings

Data were collected from telephone polls of California voters conducted by the Field Institute during the 1990 election. Three polls were conducted, each with samples drawn through random digit dialing in mid August, mid October, and one week before the election. Table 1 illustrates changes in group support during the campaign period and also demonstrates the significance of differences between proportions of groups supporting Proposition 140 on October 30. Early in the campaign period (August), support for Proposition 140 was broad-based and fairly consistent within each category.

After six weeks, younger voters became more supportive of the measure, while older voters, Hispanics, and Democrats appear to have been mobilized toward opposition. *Z*-values in table 1 indicate the probability that differences between levels of group support observed in the October 30 sample reflect actual differences that existed in the voting population. Values indicate that differences in support for Proposition 140 between age cohorts and between partisans are significant ($p = .004$, $p = .01$, respectively). Women display consistently higher levels of support for term limitations than men, and the small number of Asians in the samples appear more supportive than Anglos. However, the differences between these proportions are not significant in this bivariate analysis. Contrary to the underrepresentation hypothesis, Hispanic support show no significant deviation from Anglo support and Hispanic opposition is nearly twice as high as Anglo opposition.

Overall, the descriptive measures lend little support to the underrepresentation hypothesis while offering some support for the partisan attachment hypothesis. The findings suggest that support was most firm among strong Republican partisans and young voters. Data in table 1 also illustrate that opinions were unstable across time. This is not surprising given the intensity of the campaign and the amount of money spent during the contest. The instability in opinions suggests

TABLE 1

VOTING INTENTIONS FOR PROPOSITION 140
PERCENT IN FAVOR, OPPOSED, AND UNDECIDED
(*N* IN PARENTHESES)

		Aug. 17	Oct. 10	Oct. 30	Change	Nov. 6*
All Sample						
	Y:	66.8	68.7	61.6	−5.2	52.2
	N:	19.8	19.3	25.2	+5.4	47.8
	U:	13.3	11.9	13.2	−0.1	
		(428)	(259)	(333)		
Party						
Strong Rep.	Y:	72.9	69.8	67.6	−5.3	
(*r*)	N:	14.1	18.6	17.6	+3.5	
	U:	12.9	11.6	14.9	+2.0	
		(85)	(43)	(74)		
Strong Dem.	Y:	62.1	62.5	48.1	−14.0	
(*d*)	N:	18.2	31.2	38.5	+20.3	$Z_{(r-d)} = 2.21$
	U:	19.7	6.2	13.5	−6.2	($p = .01$)
		(66)	(48)	(52)		
Independent	Y:	63.6	73.8	58.7	−4.9	
(*i*)	N:	21.8	15.4	28.0	+6.2	$Z_{(r-i)} = 1.27$
	U:	14.5	10.8	13.3	−1.2	($p = .10$)
		(110)	(65)	(75)		
Gender						
Male	Y:	64.7	68.5	59.4	−5.3	
(*m*)	N:	23.2	20.8	28.4	+1.2	
	U:	12.1	10.8	12.3	+0.2	
		(207)	(130)	(155)		
Female	Y:	68.8	69.0	63.5	−5.3	
(*f*)	N:	16.7	17.8	22.5	+5.8	$Z_{(m-f)} = 0.77$
	U:	14.5	13.2	14.0	−0.5	($p = .22$)
		(221)	(129)	(178)		
Age						
Under 40	Y:	62.4	68.7	68.7	+6.3	
(*u*)	N:	23.4	20.2	22.9	−0.5	
	U:	14.2	11.1	8.4	−5.8	
		(141)	(99)	(131)		
Over 65	Y:	65.9	62.5	49.2	−16.7	
(*o*)	N:	14.8	22.9	30.8	+16.0	$Z_{(u-o)} = 2.63$
	U:	19.3	14.6	20.0	+ 0.7	($p = .004$)
		(88)	(48)	(65)		
Race						
Anglo	Y:	67.9	68.6	62.1	−5.8	
(*a*)	N:	19.8	19.7	23.4	+3.6	
	U:	12.2	11.8	14.5	+2.3	
		(393)	(229)	(269)		

TABLE 1 (*continued*)

		Aug. 17	Oct. 10	Oct. 30	Change	Nov. 6*
Hispanic	Y:	69.2	76.9	59.3	−9.9	
(*h*)	N:	20.5	15.4	40.0	+19.5	$Z_{(a-h)} = .22$
	U:	10.3	7.7	.7	−9.6	($p = .41$)
		(39)	(26)	(35)		
Black	Y:	43.7	64.7	54.5		
	N:	18.7	17.6	45.4		
	U:	37.5	17.6	.0		
		(16)	(17)	(11)		
Asian	Y:	71.4	70.0	80.0		
	N:	21.4	20.0	10.0		
	U:	7.1	10.0	10.0		
		(14)	(10)	(10)		

*November 6th General Election Results. *Z*-values compare differences in support between categories within the October 30 sample.

that many voters may have been affected by the campaign, or that information obtained through the campaign might structure opinions.

One alternative to the group underrepresentation hypothesis proposed that exposure to campaign information might also affect choices. Logistic regression is used to assess factors that operate to structure individual opinions aggregated in table 1 and to assess the impact of exposure to campaign information. Table 2 reports the results of estimations of support for Proposition 140 one week before the election. The dependent variable is coded: 1 = support, 0 = not support.

Three models are estimated with a baseline model (model 1) composed of demographic traits similar to those presented in table 1. A second model adds an indicator of conservative ideology and an interaction term designed to distinguish young Proposition 140 supporters from other young people who may support 140 because they have weak partisan attachments. The third model adds three indicators of campaign exposure to the baseline demographic model. *Media Information* is a four-item index that measures if the respondent indicated using mail, newspaper, radio, and/or television campaign advertisements as a source of information when deciding on ballot issues. *Contact by Demos.* is a dummy variable that indicates the respondent was contacted by the Democratic party during the campaign. A similar variable indicates the respondent was contacted by the Republican party. Independent variables in the baseline estimation include indicators of age (measured in years) and dummy variables representing women, Republican identifiers, blacks, and Hispanics.

Logistic regression results are reported in table 2. The overall fit of each model, represented by a model improvement Chi-square, is significant in each estimation. Pseudo R^2s (Aldrich and Nelson 1984) are provided for illustrative purposes and

TABLE 2

FACTORS INFLUENCING SUPPORT FOR CALIFORNIA'S TERM LIMITATION PROPOSITION 140 MAXIMUM LIKELIHOOD ESTIMATES

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	.640*	.541	.780*
	(.499)	(.508)	(.513)
Age	−.018***	−.018***	−.019***
	(.007)	(.007)	(.007)
Female	.346*	.356*	.390*
	(.236)	(.237)	(.241)
Black	−.123	−.001	−.185
	(.675)	(.689)	(.681)
Hispanic	−.316	−.306	−.338
	(.377)	(.377)	(.381)
Republican	.504**	.646***	.397*
	(.243)	(.272)	(.252)
Conservative		−.225	
		(.331)	
Age × strength of party attachment		.007	
		(.007)	
Media information			−.149
			(.141)
Contacted by Democrats			−1.154*
			(.760)
Contacted by Republicans			.871**
			(.488)
N	324	324	324
Model Chi-square (improvement)	12.7**	14.2**	19.5**
Pseudo R^2	.562	.561	.558

Note: Estimated by logistic regression with data from the Oct. 30, 1990, Field Poll. Dependent variable = 1 if respondent intended to vote in favor of Prop. 140, 0 if otherwise. Values in parentheses are standard errors of the MLE. Model 1 Chi-square based of 5 d.f., Model 2 on 7 d.f., Model 3 on 9 d.f. Pseudo R^2 is constructed with the Aldrich and Nelson (1984, 55–57) formula.

*$p < .10$ (one-tail); **$p < .05$ (one-tail); ***$p < .01$ (one-tail).

should be interpreted with caution. The coefficients demonstrate that gender and age structure support for term limits. That is, when we control for partisanship young voters and women were more likely to indicate they intended to vote for term limitations. However, the underrepresentation hypothesis is not supported by the coefficient for Hispanic voters. Results from model 2 also suggest that generational differences found in table 1 are not necessarily a function of younger voters having weaker attachments to the party system. Alternative interaction terms which utilized indicators of Independent identification were not significant. The independent effect of Republican partisanship also displays a significant, positive relationship with support in each model.

Table 2 suggests that exposure to partisan contacts plays a crucial role in predicting support for term limits in California. Those voters who rely upon information from campaign advertisements when making decisions are no more likely to support Proposition 140. However, voters who have been contacted by the Democratic party are less likely to support 140, while voters contacted by the Republicans are more likely.

Discussion

Our analysis indicates that members of some groups who are underrepresented in the legislature tend to be more disposed to support term limitations. These data cannot establish that voters supported limits because they expected greater representation in a post-term limit legislature. It is plausible that women and young voters supported limitations due to some underlying dissatisfaction with legislative institutions that cannot be measured directly with these data.

At this point, it is difficult to assess how these findings from California are representative of term limit conflicts in other states. Some of these California results are consistent with data collected in other states. A study using opinion data from Washington state's 1991 term limit contest also found that younger voters and Republicans were more supportive of limits in that state, but women were not more supportive than men (Donovan 1993). Additional attitudinal measures are needed to assess if dissatisfaction with status-quo legislative politics might mediate the opinions of members of different groups. Furthermore, researchers interested in identifying the constituency supporting limitations will perhaps need to consider how opinions are affected by the context of representation in each state. Women comprise a much larger proportion of the legislature in Washington than in California. We can only speculate that the lack of gender differences in Washington opinion polls are attributable to the higher rates of representation of women. To fully model support for these measures, future researchers might measure directly perceptions of representation and attitudes about the performance of governmental institutions.

Support for term limitations in California displays a distinctive partisan basis that became more manifest as the campaign progressed. Although journalistic discourse suggests that the term limit movement may stem from a broad-based anti-party, anti-incumbency mood, these results illustrate a gap between the opinions of strong Republican and strong Democratic identifiers. Moreover, self-described independents are less supportive than strong Republicans (see table 1) and young voters with weak partisan attachments are not strong supporters (see table 2).

These data also suggest a learning process. The partisan gap in opinions doubled over the course of the 1990 California campaign. Near the end of the campaign, those voters contacted by the Republicans were likely to voice a favorable opinion of Proposition 140. This is consistent with the advantages the initiative could bring in terms of increased Republican strength in the legislature (Moncrief

and Thompson 1991). Conversely, those contacted by Democrats were likely to voice an opinion consistent with the disadvantages the initiative might bring to legislative Democrats. Given the intensity of the campaign, and that California's parties have developed sophisticated means of contacting supporters and facilitating targeted absentee ballot voting, the finding that party contacts are associated with opinions is not entirely surprising. However, this analysis demonstrates a process where the partisan consequences of Proposition 140 were perhaps more apparent toward the end of the campaign as information about the issue was made available.

There is evidence this process might not be limited to California. Data from the 1992 elections provide further support for the idea that differentiation of attitudes by partisanship is triggered by the context of the state term limit campaign. In early 1992, when no term limit campaigns were going on, the Gallup organization measured national public opinion regarding limitations on congressional terms. Gallup found equal levels of support among Democrats, Independents, and Republicans.[4]

Surveys produced different results in those states having term limit initiatives on the ballot and the associated campaigns. In 13 of 14 such states, Republicans were more supportive of limits than Democrats (there was no difference in Wyoming). The magnitude that state-wide Republican support exceeded Democratic support ranged from a low of 7% (Oregon) to a high of 34% (North Dakota), with an average difference of 18% (Public Perspective 1993, 97).

All of this suggests that the context of real election choices (and the corresponding campaign) has a substantial effect upon opinions about term limits. Where campaigns occur and choices are real, support is differentiated by partisanship. These findings suggest it is one thing to ask people their opinions about term limits "in general," prior to any concrete campaign, and quite another to ask them about limitations after they might have received information about the potential partisan consequences. It also suggests that patterns observed in these data from California in 1990 are not necessarily unique to the highly professionalized, partisan environment of California.

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[4]In a national sample, Gallup asked voters if they supported a 12-year limit on congressional terms. In April 1992, 66% of Democrats said "yes," 67% of Republicans said "yes," and 68% of Independents said "yes" (Public Perspective 1993, 97). These figures are similar to support levels measured at the same stage of the 1990 California campaign (see table 1).

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