

Taxes, Heroin and Statehood: A Glimpse Into This Year's Ballot Measures

The New York Times

November 2, 2020 Monday 08:11 EST

Copyright 2020 The New York Times Company All Rights Reserved

Section: US

Length: 1789 words

Byline: Thomas Fuller

Highlight: The coronavirus pandemic has put a dent in the signature-gathering process, but voters still managed to put forward dozens of measures nationwide.

Body

The coronavirus pandemic has put a dent in the signature-gathering process, but voters still managed to put forward dozens of measures nationwide.

SAN FRANCISCO — If ever there was a doubt about the coronavirus's impact on American democracy, look no further than the sharp decline in citizen initiatives this year. There are 38 such measures slated across the country, around half the level in the last presidential election, when there were 72.

"The pandemic has affected every aspect of our lives and direct democracy — the citizen initiatives — is no different," said Amanda Zoch, a specialist in ballot measures at the National Conference of State Legislatures, a nonpartisan group that serves members of legislatures. "You can't go gather in-person signatures in a pandemic when you're in a stay-at-home order and supposed to be social distancing."

That is not to say that the initiatives that did make it onto the ballot are inconsequential.

Should abortions be banned after 22 weeks? Colorado voters are deciding.

Will one of the nation's most liberal states legalize affirmative action? Polls suggest Californians are leaning toward no.

When all measures are tallied, including those placed by legislatures on the ballots, there are a total of 124 statewide ballot initiatives this year, down from 154 four years ago.

Voters in the conservative-leaning states of Mississippi, Montana and South Dakota are voting on whether to legalize marijuana, which is perhaps confirmation that pot is firmly a national question. Oregon is taking it to the next level, asking voters whether possession of small amounts of drugs like heroin and cocaine should be decriminalized. Washington, D.C. has a similar question on the ballot.

There are measures to raise taxes — notably in Illinois where the governor is pushing a measure that will significantly raise his own. And in Colorado, a measure proposes lowering state income tax by a smidgen — to 4.55 percent from 4.63 percent.

Taxes, Heroin and Statehood: A Glimpse Into This Year's Ballot Measures

As usual, California is providing the nation with some of the meatiest ballot choices. Should ride-share and food-delivery drivers be treated as employees? That question has spawned the most expensive ballot initiative in U.S. history. Here's a look at other measures we'll be watching for on Tuesday.

Money and Taxes

At a time of sharp income inequalities, many of the proposals on the ballot bend toward a progressive vision of taxation, toward higher rates for companies and wealthy individuals. Put another way: Income redistribution is on the ballot.

Arizona's Proposition 208 would tax the rich to funnel money into public schools. An income tax surcharge of 3.50 percent on single filers earning above \$250,000 or joint filers earning more than \$500,000 would come in addition to the existing 4.5 percent income tax. The additional revenue would be used to hire teachers and classroom support staff, pay for teacher training and increase salaries of existing teachers and staff. Gov. Doug Ducey, a Republican, opposes the measure, but it has strong support by Democrats in the state. A Monmouth University poll from mid-October showed 60 percent in favor and 34 percent opposed.

In Illinois, the 'Allow for Graduated Income Tax' amendment would replace the state's flat income tax of 4.95 percent with graduated taxes that would range from 4.75 percent to 7.99 percent. Gov. J.B. Pritzker, a Democrat and the billionaire heir of the Hyatt hotel chain, is leading the charge and has put \$56.5 million of his own money into the campaign. He calls it the fair tax.

Under the proposed law, which comes in the form of an amendment to the state's Constitution, only those making above \$250,000 a year will see their taxes go up. "People like me should pay more, and people like you should pay less," Governor Pritzker said when he introduced the proposal last year. Illinois needs the money. If the measure doesn't succeed, the state's debt may be downgraded to junk status by credit ratings agencies.

If voters pass California's Proposition 13, it will be a watershed moment for a system that for decades has ensured low property taxes for longtime owners. The proposed constitutional change would raise billions of dollars for schools and local governments by lifting the protections for commercial property owners. It would tweak a landmark 1978 ballot initiative, Proposition 13, that limited property tax increases to 2 percent, even if the value of the property soared. Under the proposed amendment, commercial and industrial properties would be taxed based on their market value rather than their purchase price. In this high-stakes measure, supporters have raised \$67 million and opponents \$74 million. A recent poll by the Public Policy Institute of California, a nonpartisan research organization, showed near even support.

Also on the ballot are high-stakes measures for labor in both California and Florida. Amendment 2 in Florida would increase the state minimum wage to \$15 in 2026 from \$8.56 in 2020. California's Proposition 22 would allow ride-share and delivery drivers to be considered contractors, not employees. A campaign led by Uber and Lyft and the delivery service DoorDash has spent \$200 million to back the proposal, making it the costliest state initiative in history.

And in Alaska, oil companies have poured millions of dollars into a campaign to defeat Measure 1, which would raise taxes on oil extracted from the state's North Slope. The money, which would be funneled into the state's budget, would help relieve the state's deficit. "Alaskans have received far less than Texans, North Dakotans, Russians, Iraqis, Nigerians, Brazilians and Norwegians," says the official pamphlet backing the measure.

Drugs

If Measure 110 passes, Oregon will be the first state to decriminalize small amounts of drugs such as cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine. Under the proposed law, possession of drugs would be classified as a violation, akin to a traffic ticket for not wearing a seatbelt. Backed by the singer John Legend and the Oregon Democratic Party, among others, the law would also establish a fund for drug treatment that would be financed by marijuana taxes.

Taxes, Heroin and Statehood: A Glimpse Into This Year's Ballot Measures

Oregon Measure 109 would legalize psilocybin, the psychedelic mushroom, for people age 21 and older. "Research at America's top universities shows that psilocybin therapy can help people suffering from depression, anxiety and addiction," said Representative Earl Blumenauer of Oregon, a Democrat.

Arizona, Montana, New Jersey and South Dakota all will vote on measures that will legalize, tax and regulate marijuana for adults age 21 and over. South Dakota is also voting on a measure that proposes legalizing medical cannabis, as is Mississippi.

If all of the marijuana measures pass, cannabis will be legal for medical use in 36 states and recreational use in 15.

Revisiting the Past

The official name of Rhode Island is the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations. Rhode Island Question 1 would remove the second half. Voters already had a shot at this in a ballot measure a decade ago and rejected the change. But the state's Democrats are now counting on the momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement to approve the measure this time. "This old, festering wound still needs healing," said State Senator Harold M. Metts, a Democrat and a co-sponsor of the measure.

In Mississippi, Ballot Measure 3 asks voters to approve a new state flag with red, yellow and blue stripes, a magnolia flower and the words, "In God We Trust." The state's previous flag, which dated to 1894 and contained a Confederate battle cross, was decommissioned by lawmakers in June. If the new flag is rejected by voters, it's back to the drawing board.

Abortion

In addition to Colorado's Proposition 115, which would prohibit abortions in the state after a fetus reaches 22 weeks, Louisiana Amendment 1 would add these words to the state's Constitution: "Nothing in this constitution shall be construed to secure or protect a right to abortion, or require the funding of abortion." The measure was supported by two anti-abortion Democrats: Gov. John Bel Edwards and State Senator Katrina Jackson.

California

Even in a pandemic,

the Golden State put a raft of big questions on the ballot.

Propositions 17, 20 and 25 are major criminal justice measures. Proposition 17 would restore the right to vote for felons on parole. Proposition 20 would partly rollback earlier measures that had allowed people convicted of certain felonies early parole consideration. Proposition 25 is a referendum to uphold or reject a law that will replace cash bail. Support for the law falls mainly along left-right divides. But not entirely. Opponents include California chapters of the N.A.A.C.P. who argue that the computer algorithms that will decide who is allowed pretrial freedom may work against people of color and those from poorer areas.

Proposition 16 would repeal a previous measure passed in 1996 that banned affirmative action in the state. "Californians have built the fifth largest and strongest economy in the world, but too many hardworking Californians are not sharing in our state's prosperity," said Shirley Weber, a sponsor of the measure and the chairwoman of the Legislative Black Caucus. Supporters are a who's who of leading Democrats in the state. But the measure is polling poorly, perhaps a reminder that one of America's most liberal states also has a strong libertarian streak.

Proposition 24 would strengthen California's landmark 2018 data privacy law. It would create an agency to enforce the law and would require businesses to give consumers a say on how such data as location or race are used.

And More ...

Other measures across the country would introduce ranked choice voting systems (Alaska and Massachusetts) and would remove local governments' authority to regulate firearms (Montana). Nevada has measures that would

Taxes, Heroin and Statehood: A Glimpse Into This Year's Ballot Measures

recognizes the marriage of couples regardless of gender and a separate measure that would require utilities to acquire 50 percent of their electricity from renewable resources by 2030. Puerto Rico is asking voters about statehood, the sixth time the question has been asked. And Washington is asking voters whether to uphold a law requiring comprehensive sexual health education in public schools.

Finally, amid the dizzying diversity of proposed new laws, Arkansas and Florida have ballot measures about ballot measures. Both would make it harder to pass laws through that process.

PHOTOS: A billboard in Jackson, Miss., expressing support for a new state flag without Confederate symbols. (PHOTOGRAPH BY ROGELIO V. SOLIS/ASSOCIATED PRESS); Carl DeMaio, chairman of Reform California, urging defeat of a plan to lift a cap on property taxes. (PHOTOGRAPH BY MIKE BLAKE/REUTERS)

Load-Date: November 4, 2020

End of Document