

## California ballot wars already in full blitz mode as voters head for the mailbox

Politico.com

October 5, 2020 Monday 00:25Invalid date found for VDI: (VDI not available) XCEDOCID: 152 LNI: 610H-SHG1-F118-903X-00000-00. Date output 'as-is'. GMT

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**Section:** POLITICOPICKS

**Length:** 1349 words

**Highlight:** The likelihood of widespread early voting is forcing campaigns to rethink how and when they deploy resources.

### Body

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OAKLAND - The campaign crunch came early this year in California.

Interest groups are bombing the airwaves right now as the state sends out 21 million mail-in ballots to every single active, registered voter. The likelihood of widespread early voting is forcing campaigns to rethink how and when they deploy resources.

The next week could supplant the days before Election Day as the most critical messaging window for those looking to influence the results of the 12 ballot initiatives up this year in California. Some have been spending for nearly a month already.

"There's no Election Day anymore," said Republican campaign consultant Dave Gilliard. "There's 30 or 40 election days," which means "if you're not campaigning in September, you're going to miss out."

The expanded, pandemic-era voting season has given a huge advantage to the most deep-pocketed campaigns, forcing lower-profile efforts to make decisions to burn through all their cash way before their opponents. With a seemingly bottomless war chest, gig companies like Uber and Lyft were able to start an all-out blitz by Labor Day in trying to win an exemption from California's strict new labor law. But efforts with a fraction of gig funds had to make calculations about how early to join the fray - if they could still find airtime.

Check out POLITICO's California Ballot Tracker [here](#).

In past cycles, campaigns would be sure to save their money for the vital final week before Election Day, said longtime Democratic campaign consultant Gale Kaufman. The imperative was to not "go dark" and disappear from television screens and mailboxes as voters were making up their minds.

But now, Kaufman said, "the feeling is that a much larger group of voters than ever before are planning to vote either right away or shortly after they received their ballot." Whereas campaigns might have held their fire until mid-October, this year the airwaves were saturated by September.

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"Since Labor Day we've seen an unprecedented amount of ads on TV," said Robin Swanson, a communications strategist who is working on a ballot initiative that would tighten California's privacy laws.

Campaign officials believe as many as half of California voters will fill out their ballots almost immediately. A consultant for a major initiative campaign, who asked not to be named to discuss internal operations, said the campaign's polling found two to three times as many voters as normal planned to vote immediately.

The early mail ballots are expected to skew liberal. Polling shows California Democrats are far more likely to vote by mail than their Republican counterparts, in part because President Donald Trump has regularly and baselessly claimed mail voting is rife with fraud.

"For better or worse, Trump has put the fear into people that the post office is not going to deliver ballots, so people are going to mail them in earlier," Swanson said.

It's not just television. California consultants accustomed to widespread mail voting have already honed the technique of putting mail and digital ads before voters in the time window when they are likeliest to vote, said Paul Mitchell, vice president of Political Data Inc. The 2020 cycle has simply forced campaigns to recalibrate their timing, Mitchell said.

"You might have money for 10 mailers in your budget, so the people who vote early would get seven early and three late just in case," Mitchell said. "The campaign consultants that are running campaigns in California, they've gotten so used to this already that adding a little layer of you have more people voting earlier, that's a small adjustment."

California is so deep into the campaign cycle that initiative campaigns have already been airing response ads picking apart their opponents' attack ads. It's the kind of counterattack would normally occur in late October.

Because initiative campaigns have hundreds of millions of dollars to spend in California - and everyone wants to be on the airwaves now - they are clamoring for finite advertising space and in some cases facing steep rate increases. Unlike candidates, initiative efforts do not have protected ad rates.

"The desire is definitely creating more of an inventory tightness because everyone wants to be on earlier than they normally would," said Sheri Sadler Wolf, who runs the ad-buying firm Sadler Strategic Media.

"I think we experienced the craziest Sept. 25 we've had in a long time," Wolf added. "We couldn't ship the spots fast enough."

Those dynamics have benefited campaigns with the money to go up earlier and sustain their spending through November.

In Sacramento, the nation's 20th largest media market, dialysis companies recently spent \$22,000 for one 30-second ad during a Sunday evening NFL game on Sept. 20 - a sizable increase over the \$15,000 they dropped two years ago for a similarly timed spot on the local NBC affiliate. The deep-pocketed companies spent more than \$110 million in 2018 fighting a union-proposed initiative limiting dialysis clinic revenues and are again expected to mount one of the most expensive ballot fights in California this year against Prop 23, another union initiative placing more restrictions on clinics.

But dialysis companies have more competition for airtime this year.

Gig companies have raised more than \$180 million on their overall effort to support Prop 22, which they placed on the ballot to prevent their workers from being reclassified as full-time employees deserving of benefits. At the same television station in Sacramento, KCRA, gig companies spent \$266,000 on ads through the first three weeks of September, FCC records show.

Rent control is on the ballot for the second consecutive general election, and the ad rate for a week of airtime in Sacramento ballooned tenfold.

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The pressure is on. Despite earlier efforts, several initiative campaigns are still struggling to make up polling deficits by convincing undecided voters. September polling found many voters haven't made up their minds on initiatives that would reinstate affirmative action and allow more rent control. The jury is even out on the gig worker initiative despite the tens of millions spent by Uber, DoorDash and Lyft.

The window is closing quickly on those campaigns' chances to move a substantial bloc of voters. And those who have not formed an opinion on ballot initiatives tend to leave them blank.

"I have a concern they just vote for president and mail it in," Kaufman said.

Campaigns such as the one backing Prop 16, the affirmative action measure, may struggle to gain a foothold this fall. The Legislature placed the proposal on the ballot and was counting on a wave of racial awareness following the Minneapolis police killing of George Floyd to help the proposal pass in November. Lawmakers are hoping to reverse a 24-year-old law banning racial or gender preferences for university admissions or public hiring.

The Prop 16 effort has raised \$13 million so far from wealthy activists and organizations like Kaiser. That might qualify as a decent sum through September in a less competitive year, but pales in comparison to the gobs of money other campaigns have at their disposal, and smaller campaigns have to pick their spots more carefully. The Yes on 16 campaign waited until this week to launch its first ad, and FCC records so far show it is only on air in Los Angeles and the Bay Area.

But some campaign officials hope 2020's singular dynamics also create new opportunities. Voters are largely confined to their homes and feeling disempowered by a crippling pandemic and a drumbeat of dismal news.

Courtnei Pugh, co-general consultant for Yes on 16, said that environment makes for a receptive electorate. She argued that the right message can cut through the noise in an ever-crowded campaign season.

"There are lots of stressed voters that want to vote for something that is positive and attainable and relevant to their daily lives," Pugh said. "In a stressed-out, 'I am homeschooling my kid, I am doing Zoom calls from home, playing all kinds of different roles right now' - our electorate is really going to want social cues."

**Load-Date:** October 6, 2020