

With focus on the race for president, propositions are just as important

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Body

As Nov. 3 quickly approaches, those who are voting have the task of completing one of their most important civic duties, participating in voting.

Along with this year's presidential election, comes a long list of ballot propositions for California voters.

California is a direct democracy state, meaning that citizens can create their own initiatives with hopes of getting them on the ballot; interest groups or corporate interests can also form petitions to get their propositions on the ballot.

"Because of that, we end up getting a lot of ballot propositions in California," professor Lisa Bryant said. "There's a lot of people here, there's a lot of different needs and people want to get those needs addressed through [the] government."

Voters in California have 12 propositions on the ballot to vote on, and much of the language on them can be very difficult to untangle. For college-aged voters, propositions that directly affect them include Proposition 16, which would reinstate affirmative action in admissions decisions, and Proposition 18, which would allow 17-year-olds to vote in primary and special elections if they'll be 18 by the general election in November.

Also on the ballot is Proposition 22 that would classify ride-share and food delivery company employees as independent contractors and Proposition 21, which would grant municipalities the power to pass rent control measures on rental housing that's more than 15 years old.

"It's what we would [call] high cognitive overload," said Bryant. "They have to research this ballot proposition, they have to figure out the legalese, what the language is and what it all means."

"And [propositions] get into really nuanced and complex issues, and I think it is really difficult for voters to think about," Bryant said.

Those who propose ballot propositions are not in charge of naming them, instead propositions get their number in order of when they arrive on Secretary of State Alex Padilla's desk.

Sometimes confusion between ballot numbers arises when propositions are numbered the same, but were introduced in different years.

This was especially true between Proposition 13 from 1978, which dealt with property tax, and Proposition 13 on the ballot in March, which dealt with school funding. The proposition was defeated, and the Los Angeles Times

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reported that voters confused it with 1978's Proposition 13. The confusion was heightened with Proposition 15 headed for the November ballot, which would modify the original Proposition 13 and make it easier to raise commercial property taxes.

"Prop. 13 got defeated, and I think it was because so many people confused that proposition with [1978's] Prop. 13," Bryant said. "They thought it was people trying to overcome property taxes even though it wasn't. It was money for higher education. It was money for community colleges and CSUs and UCs."

California voters have a unique role in their government, because they have the power to enact laws that have an enormous effect on the state.

"Things that are public law, things like taxes, things like your school board, things like 'should we expand voting rights, or not', [for example] should we give them to 17-year-olds, should we give them to people on parole," Bryant said. "I think those are things that all have to do with public law and how government functions and how government runs, and I think it's important to vote on those things."

While voters have a chance to play policymaker during the election season, many voters are not as articulate as politicians when it comes to making legislative decisions.

"I think there are some things that are probably left to our elected officials to deal with, and they can get expert witnesses and they can do a really intensive analysis on it, which the average voter can't do," Bryant said. "Some things really are outside of the scope of what we should ask the average voter to do."

Because of the complicated and overwhelming nature of ballot propositions, some voters do not complete the entire ballot.

"As you start going down the ballot, you get into things like the board of trustees and judges, and the ballot propositions, you start to see people drop off, and they don't complete those races," Bryant said. "[But] we do know that when people vote at home, they are much more likely to complete the entire ballot."

Propositions are not only full of political jargon that is hard for voters to decipher, there is also little transparency about who is funding the propositions.

"I think that it would be a lot more helpful, if there are a lot more efforts and initiatives, to clear things up about [propositions]," fourth-year student Joseph Bocanegra said.

"I believe California's propositions may not be truthful and rely on persuasive techniques rather than objectivity, which seems justified by those with a certain agenda," said Nathan Tan, a third year Fresno State student. "What is especially interesting about ballot proposition ads is the source of funding for those ads."

Fear of hidden agendas and biases in the media also turn off voters from looking into propositions.

Bryant said that CNN and Fox News have a reputation of being biased. Because of this, people tend to shy away from watching presidential candidates and learning about politics.

"If we can have some non-partisan organizations, like the League of Women Voters [who] used to run debates, that might be helpful," Bryant said.

Voters are not completely left on their own devices, because there are resources for voters to refer to in order to keep themselves informed.

One of them is voter's edge. Voters can put their address on the website, and it will then bring up the candidates and propositions that will be on the ballot.

The ballot propositions are simplified making it easy for voters to comprehend, but it also takes into account how those propositions will affect the state if you vote NO or YES on it.

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"It also gives you a fiscal impact, and you can look and see who is funding the propositions," Bryant said.

While there are websites that voters can visit, the state of California and the League of Women Voters also provides information for residents regarding ballot propositions.

"Study that information," said Thomas Holyoke, Fresno State political science professor. "Pay less attention to the political advertisements regarding them as not all of them are accurate."

"Voting means you have a voice in what becomes state law. Not voting means you accept whatever the result is."

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