

Ballot Issues Attest to Anger in California

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LOS ANGELES — From San Diego to Mount Shasta, voters are expressing mounting disgust over California's fiscal meltdown and deteriorating services, and they are offering scores of voter initiatives that seek to change the way the state does business.

Rich Pedroncelli/Associated Press



Proposed cuts to social services brought out demonstrators in Sacramento Friday. Some voters are taking protests further.

Over 30 such [initiatives](#) — among over 60 total initiatives so far — are now wending their way toward the ballot box. Every day, it seems another vexed voter adds a proposal to the fray.

Some verge on the radical, like one to establish the state's first constitutional convention in over a century, to rewrite California's most fundamental legislative rules. There are initiatives in circulation that would reduce the time the Legislature is in session, punish legislators for late budgets and criminalize "false statements about legislative acts."

Other states, of course, are also suffering through red ink, but none have quite the same mechanism as California's to let voters get involved with the process. Despite the fact that past initiatives helped get California into its budget crisis — forcing spending in some areas while limiting taxation in others — the pileup of new ones suggests that many voters still believe they hold the solution to the state's mess. Few seem to believe that elected officials are up to the job.

Some initiatives, in fact, could even limit the initiative process itself, or erase old ones.

The number of initiatives so far, while high, is not the largest in history. But the rage that underlies them has not been seen in decades, said lawmakers, pollsters, political consultants and the proponents.

"The feeling is one of revolt," said John Grubb, the campaign director for [Repair California](#), a coalition behind a pair of initiatives to call a constitutional convention.

"And come January, they will start negotiating the budget again, and there will be more

fear and loathing. The feeling here is that California state government is broken, and we need not a little fix, but a big fix.”

Most of the initiatives seek a spot on the November ballot, when voters will choose a new governor and other statewide officials. And while many of the measures will fail to get enough signatures to make it to Election Day, the sheer number of change-centered ideas reflects California voters’ frustration.

In 2009, lawmakers struggled to close billions of dollars’ worth of budget gaps. The [net result](#) was service reductions — from longer lines at the Department of Motor Vehicles to the loss of dental benefits for [Medicaid](#) recipients — as well as widespread furloughs for state workers and the rare use of i.o.u.’s issued to vendors and residents who were owed tax refunds.

But California is still projected to be \$20 billion in the red over the next 18 months, and some state services are already showing the scars from their cuts.

The public university system, once the crown jewel of California, is struggling with layoffs, tuition increases and outright student and faculty revolts. In the public secondary schools, classroom sizes have swelled and program cuts are rampant.

And everything costs more: sales taxes went up last year, as did many user fees.

On Friday, Gov. [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) released his latest executive budget, with pay reductions for state workers and more draconian service cuts.

California voters are distinctly unimpressed with the roles played in the crisis by the governor and legislators. Many lawmakers cater to the fringe elements of their respective political parties and are beholden to special interests that finance their campaigns. A paltry [13 percent of registered voters](#) approve of the job the Legislature does, according to a poll by the Public Policy Institute of California.

And so the efforts to take matters into their own hands.

“It is a very California moment,” said Robert Hertzberg, co-chairman of [California Forward](#), a group of business, political and academic leaders that seeks to change the state’s budget processes. “It is almost like there are a bunch of weapons on the battlefield, and the bullets will be the funding of these initiatives.”

The governor has embraced California Forward’s proposals.

To get an initiative on the ballot, a person or group pays a \$200 fee, gets approval of the text from the state attorney general's office, and then has 150 days to collect hundreds of thousands of signatures, which must be rigorously verified against voter registration records.

Throughout the decades, initiatives have followed the changing concerns of voters. In the 1930s, for instance, many dealt with liquor regulations, and in the 1970s and early '80s, taxation was a principal concern. The most famous initiative of that era was Proposition 13, which put a cap on property taxes. In the past 20 years, criminal justice and civil rights issues have often been on the ballot.

"Government reform has been a repeated theme over time," said Nicole Winger, a spokeswoman for the secretary of state's office, which manages the initiative process. "Now those measures are on the rise again."

The initiatives concerning the state budget are most in the spotlight, particularly the one that calls for a convention to rewrite the state's constitution. Delegates to such a convention would quite likely change the law requiring a two-thirds vote in the Legislature to pass a budget, and they could impose limitations on the initiative process and undo earlier initiatives that require spending for certain programs.

A constitutional convention could also alter the balance of power between state and local governments by giving cities greater control over their portion of the state budget. Many critics of the current system deplore Sacramento's centralized spending power and policy making for issues like education and local public safety.

Other ballot efforts would put stringent spending limits on the government, require a rainy-day fund and end \$2 billion in corporate tax breaks.

Much of the anger in the ballot ideas is aimed straight at the Legislature. There are proposals to cut the pay of lawmakers in half and to prohibit them from voting on legislation that would have a financial impact on their contributors. (One that would force them to get drug tests recently failed to pass muster.)

Gabriella Holt, president of [Citizens for California Reform](#), an advocacy group behind proposals to cut the pay of the Legislature and shorten its term, said, "We decided we should put the question to voters."

"I think people are very, very angry and very, very frustrated," Ms. Holt added, "and they want to send a message that they want to take back their government."

Placing the Legislature in the ballot cross hairs may be of questionable effectiveness. But last spring, the only one of six ballot measures to succeed was one that prevented lawmakers and other high-ranking officials from getting raises in times of fiscal distress.

One initiative would even redraw the boundaries of Congressional districts, in order to make those races more competitive.

“There is a great deal of voter unhappiness with the dysfunction of their Legislature generally,” said the plan’s proponent, Charles T. Munger, who donated more than \$1 million toward a successful 2008 initiative to redraw state legislative districts, “and some of that is fueling the general voter’s desire to see reform of the political process.”

He added: “The gerrymandering of districts is a national problem. But this is my state, and I am trying to fix it here.”

Whatever the outcome of these initiatives, the end of the year is almost certain to bring change to California, whether it is modest adjustments to the way the state passes its budget or a full-scale constitutional convention.

“Lots of people are unhappy, but for so many different and conflicting reasons that it is hard to envision where we will end up,” said Bruce E. Cain, a professor of political science at the [University of California, Berkeley](#). “It could be a chaotic jumble.”

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