



INITIATIVES AND REFERENDA — AN UPDATE OF THEIR USE

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Colorado voters have been increasingly busy at the voting booths in recent years. The three decades of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s show substantial use of the state's initiative and referendum processes, with a sharp increase in the number of initiatives particularly notable. In the elections of the 1990s there were 38 initiatives on the state ballots, compared with a total of 34 for the 1970s and 80s combined.¹

The number of total ballot proposals for the 30-year period was 125, with 56 questions (45 percent of the total) placed before voters in the 1990s. Ballot questions totaled 39 in the 1970s and 30 in the 1980s.

This paper presents data on the frequency of use of the initiative and referendum in Colorado in the last 30 years and lists the topics covered in statewide ballot questions in the 1990s. It updates earlier issue briefs to include results through the 1999 statewide election.

Number of Proposals. Beginning with the election of 1970, there have been 125 statewide ballot proposals, both initiated and referred. Table 1 illustrates that the increased number of ballot issues in the 1990s is due to the increased use of the initiative, with 38 proposals on the five General Election ballots since 1990 and 34 in the ten elections between 1970 and 1988. The table shows the increase in use of the initiative in statewide elections from 1970 through 1999.

¹ The initiative is the process by which citizens can place proposals on the ballot for Colorado citizens to approve or reject. The referendum, as used in this paper, means the process by which the General Assembly refers proposals to the people in a statewide election. State statutes and the Colorado Constitution are subject to amendment by the initiative and referendum.

Table 1
Statewide Ballot Proposals in Last 30 Years

	1970s	1980s	1990s	Total
Total Ballot Proposals	39	30	56	125
Initiated	19	15	38	72
Referred	20	15	18	53

Success of Proposals. As for success of proposals in pass-fail rates, voters are much more likely to approve referenda than initiatives. Table 2 shows the pass-fail results for the initiatives and referenda proposed by decade since 1970.

Table 2
Success of Statewide Ballot Proposals

Decade	Referenda (Approved/ Rejected)	Initiatives (Approved/ Rejected)
1970s	20 (16/4)	19 (6/13)
1980s	15 (13/2)	15 (6/9)
1990s	18 (11/7)	38 (14/24)
Totals	53 (40/13)	72 (26/46)

The overall approval of referenda of better than three to one contrasts sharply with the failure rate of initiatives of almost two to one. Several reasons might be offered for this disparity, but the pattern of more of the legislative measures approved and more of the initiatives rejected has been consistent in each of the three decades.

Constitutional and Statutory Proposals. Of the 125 ballot proposals presented to the voters since 1970, the overwhelming number – 100 – were submitted as amendments to the Colorado Constitution, with 24 being amendments to the Colorado statutes and one being strictly a TABOR question for voter approval of debt. Over half of the constitutional proposals have been approved in contrast to less than half of the statutory amendments being approved. The pass-fail number for constitutional amendments is 57 approved, 43 rejected; statutory proposals resulted in 10 approved, 14 rejected; and the one TABOR question was approved.

Topics of Ballot Proposals in the 1990s. The grouping of the statewide proposals on the ballot in the 1990s may take many forms. The table which follows lists them in 12 broad categories, beginning with the categories that had the most proposals. Two categories are listed with nine proposals – "Elections and the Political Process" and "Taxpayer's Bill of Rights Issues"; there are eight proposals under "gaming," all occurring between 1990 and 1994.

The reader will note that the number of questions referred in the 1990s (total of 18) is slightly higher than the total for the 1980s (total of 15). There are two reasons that the number of referred measures in the 1990s is as high as it is. First, the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights, adopted in 1992, requires voter approval of tax increase questions and long-term debt obligations; second, annual elections are provided for TABOR issues. Six TABOR referenda were on state ballots in the 1990s, but some of the tax and debt questions probably would not have been submitted to the voters without the requirement of voter approval. Also listed below under the TABOR heading are initiatives in 1990 and 1992 on the adoption of TABOR and a 1994 initiative proposing tobacco tax increases.

Many of the most controversial issues on a ballot are the result of the initiative process. For example, questions on abortion, animal protection, and water in the San Luis Valley were initiated proposals. In contrast, some of the referred issues have been technical issues or limited in scope, such as the removal of obsolete constitutional provisions and qualifications of county sheriffs. Also note that there may be diminished interest in initiated proposals for gaming in various localities, with the high point reached in 1992 (four proposals) and no proposals since 1996.

**Proposed Initiatives and Referenda
by Subject Area — 1990 through 1999**

- (A) **Elections and the Political Process**
Term limits – 1990, 1992, 1996, 1998
Presidential primary – 1990
Campaign finance – 1994, 1996
Mailing ballot information booklets – 1994, 1996
Total 9
- (B) **Taxpayer's Bill of Rights Issues**
"Amendment 1," adoption – 1990, 1992
Exemptions from Amendment 1:
Sales tax for tourist-related purchases – 1993
Tobacco taxes – 1994
Financial obligations – nonstate prisons – 1995
Unemployment compensation – 1996
Taxes and fees for highway construction – 1997
State retention of excess state revenues – 1998
Financing state transportation projects – 1999
Total 9
- (C) **Gaming Proposals**
Permit gaming in various cities – 1990, 1992 (4), 1994, 1996
Local vote after statewide vote – 1992
Total 8
- (D) **Process for Amendments – Initiatives and Referenda**
Election reform ("Amendment 12") – 1994
Single subject requirement – 1994
Voter approval (60% requirement) – 1996
Petitions – 1996
Total 4
- (E) **Agriculture and Livestock**
Uniform regulation of livestock operations – 1998
Regulation of commercial hog facilities – 1998
Water meters in the San Luis Valley – 1998
Payments for water by the Rio Grande Water Conservation District – 1998
Total 4
- (F) **Bill of Rights Amendments**
No protected status ("Amendment 2") – 1992
Obscenity – First Amendment – 1994
Parental rights – 1996

	Total 3
(G) Animal Protection	
Black bear hunting – 1992	
Prohibited methods of taking wildlife – 1996	
	Total 2
(H) Education	
Vouchers – 1992	
Education reform – sales tax – 1992	
Income tax credit for education – 1998	
	Total 3
(I) Open Space and State Lands	
Lottery revenues for parks, recreation, wildlife – 1992	
State trust lands – 1996	
	Total 2
(J) Criminal Procedures	
Rights of crime victims – 1992	
Post conviction bail – 1994	
	Total 2
(K) Abortion	
Partial birth abortions – 1998	
Parental notification – 1998	
	Total 2
(L) Other Topics	
Removal of obsolete constitutional provisions – 1990, 1992	
Labor – workers choice of care – 1994	
Medicaid – state medical assistance – repayment – 1994	
Property tax – exempt property – 1996	
County sheriffs – qualifications – 1996	
Broomfield – creation of city and county – 1998	
Private/public ownership of local health care services – 1998	
	Total 8

Constitutional Changes, 1992 and 1994. Four constitutional changes were adopted in the 1990s relating to the initiative and referendum: The single subject requirement for bills in the General Assembly is now required for initiatives and referenda (1994); referred and initiated Taxpayer's Bill of Rights questions are allowed in odd-year statewide elections

(1992); state and local governments are required to prepare ballot analyses that are mailed to every household with registered voters (1994); and the mailing date for local ballot booklets was changed to allow the coordinated mailing of local and state booklets (1996).

Statutory Change, 1996. Another change in the ballot information process affects the content of the ballot information booklet mailed to all voter households in the state. Legislation enacted in 1996 directs that information on the performance of judges and justices of the Supreme Court be included in the booklet for the trial and appellate judges seeking retention. This information is prepared by the Commissions on Judicial Performance.

U. S. Supreme Court Decision, 1999. On January 12, the U. S. Supreme Court upheld a decision of the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals pertaining to initiatives in Colorado. In *Buckley vs. American Constitutional Law Foundation* (ACLF) (case #97-930), the court rejected one constitutional and two statutory requirements in Colorado law: that petition circulators be registered voters; that circulators of petitions wear identification badges indicating whether they are being paid or are volunteers seeking signatures on petitions; and that sponsors of initiatives file monthly reports which identify their paid circulators and disclose how much they have been paid. The Court held that these requirements interfered with the petitioner's right to "core political speech."

The Court sustained the constitutionality of other provisions of the Colorado initiative process. Petition circulators must be at least 18 years of age; circulators must attach an affidavit to each petition disclosing their name, address, and verification that the signatures were witnessed by the circulator; and the limit of six months is valid as the time in which signatures are to be collected.

10th Circuit Court Decision, 2000. The constitutionality of the single subject requirement for initiated proposals was upheld by the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals on February 10, 2000. In *Campbell vs. Buckley* (case # 98-1329), the Court held that it was ". . . satisfied that the state's reasons for its procedures [relating to the single subject requirement] are sufficiently weighty to justify the procedures."