

Greenlining's Guide to November Ballot Propositions: *Corporations Trying to Buy Our Democracy -- Yet Again*

NO on Proposition 23 and Dirty Oil

It's getting to be a depressingly familiar pattern: A ballot crowded with confusing propositions, one or more of which were placed there by corporate interests looking to pad their own pockets at the expense of taxpayers. Here we go again.

In June, voters narrowly defeated two such special-interest measures, Propositions 16 and 17, whose corporate sponsors spent a combined \$56 million on their campaigns. While in the end the voters made the right choice, two big corporations came close to using the ballot box to buy policies designed for their own benefit. This pattern of special-interest initiatives is repeating yet again -- a sure sign that it's time to reform the ballot initiative process.

The Worst of the Worst: NO on 23

Two Texas oil companies, Valero and Tesoro, have already kicked in millions of dollars to place Prop. 23 on the ballot and are expected to spend millions more before election day. Prop. 23 "suspends" -- and effectively kills -- California's clean-energy law, known as AB 32. Prop. 23 would strangle progress toward moving California away from dependence on oil and other dirty energy, meaning our kids will continue to breathe polluted air for decades. Because communities of color and low-income Californians already breathe some of the dirtiest air in our state, we'll be hurt first and worst. Prop. 23 is being falsely sold as a jobs-protection measure, but it will actually cripple the one part of California's economy -- clean energy -- that's been generating large numbers of jobs in recent years. The Texas oil giants want us to believe they're looking out for our communities, but we know better. NO on 23.

Elections and Redistricting: No on 20 and 27

Proposition 11, passed in 2008, took the process of drawing state legislative districts away from the legislature and governor and gave it to a new Citizens Redistricting Commission. That commission is now being selected, and Greenlining is monitoring the selection process to ensure that people of all backgrounds have a fair shot of being selected. It's way too early to know whether this new system will be an improvement over the old one, but two propositions would go ahead and make changes anyway. Prop. 20 would expand the Citizens Redistricting Commission's authority to include drawing congressional districts, while Prop. 27 would repeal Prop. 11 entirely and give redistricting back to the legislature. Let's give the new system a chance to work before we start making changes. No on 20 and 27.

Budget and Taxes: 21, 22, 24, 25 and 26

Everyone knows that California's budget is a mess. Massive shortfalls have led to drastic cuts in state services, with more cuts likely, and old and unfair rules make it impossible for the governor and legislature to pass a budget on time. No fewer than five measures on the November ballot address California's ongoing budget nightmare, and they're a mixed bag. A couple offer modest but useful steps forward, but none comes close to being a comprehensive solution:

Funding for State Parks: Yes on 21. California's state parks have taken a severe budget hit recently, leading to reduced hours, inadequate maintenance and other problems. Prop. 21 will help solve this problem by increasing the vehicle license fee by \$18 per year, with the funds dedicated to our state parks. It's a useful step, but California needs to think more creatively about our state parks, and especially about making them more accessible to low-income families. Yes on 21.

Tinkering With the Budget Process: No Position on 22 and 25. Greenlining has chosen not to take a position on these two measures, which fiddle with the mechanics of the budget process. Prop. 25, which eliminates the two-thirds vote requirement to pass a state budget, seems intriguing at first, but it doesn't change the two-thirds requirement to pass even modest tax increases. So Prop. 25, though not a bad idea in and of itself, won't solve the real problem and might actually make it harder to enact comprehensive reform later.

End Unfair Corporate Tax Breaks: Yes on 24. Budget agreements passed in 2008 and 2009 slashed vital services, but also gave a series of Christmas presents in the form of whopping tax breaks to a handful of big corporations. These tax breaks go overwhelmingly to a small number of very large companies, leaving the rest of us holding the bag. Prop. 24 levels the playing field for large corporations and small businesses. Yes on 24.

More Budget Cuts to Vital Services: No on 26. It's already so hard to raise needed revenues in California – even from the wealthiest corporations or individuals – that we've seen services slashed and damage done to our state's competitiveness. Prop. 26, put on the ballot by a coalition of big business interests, would make a bad situation worse, requiring a two-thirds legislative vote for certain state fees and a two-thirds vote of the electorate for some local fees. The new requirements would even apply to fees for cleanup of toxic waste sites. No on 26.

Water Bond Confusion: No on 18. Backers of this \$11.1 billion bond issue to upgrade the state's water system are trying to get it removed from the ballot, but as of this writing it's unclear if that effort will succeed. Until they get their act together, we'll say No on 18.

End Prohibition of Marijuana for Adults: Yes on 19. The war on drugs has long had discriminatory impacts on communities of color, and marijuana is a prime example. While African Americans and Latinos use marijuana at the same or lower rates than whites, they are far more likely to be arrested and jailed for marijuana offenses. And a criminal record for a drug offense doesn't just involve arrest and possible fines or jail: It can deprive a young person of access to student loans, housing, job and career opportunities, in some cases for life. Prop. 19 isn't perfect – the way it's drafted makes it

unlikely to generate anywhere near the amount of tax revenue some proponents have claimed – but it's step toward a saner, less discriminatory approach. Yes on 19.

The Initiative Process Needs Reform

The ballot initiative process was supposed to be about citizen democracy, and some worthy proposals do make it to the ballot. Increasingly, however, proposals that benefit ordinary citizens are outnumbered by measures written to benefit one wealthy interest or another – often huge corporations that can pump tens of millions of dollars into misleading ad campaigns as they try to buy special favors at the ballot box. The ideal of citizen democracy is a good one, but it's been badly corrupted. California needs to find a way to again make the initiative process what it was meant to be.

Greenlining will soon release its recommendation for reforming the initiative process.