

California Special Election: voters reject right-wing measures

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In a show of opposition to the right-wing policies pursued by Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, voters in California rejected all of the initiatives backed by the former action hero turned politician in Tuesday's Special Election. The results of the vote dealt a serious blow to the political prospects of the Schwarzenegger administration, which has seen its approval ratings collapse over the course of the past year.

In addition to the measures backed by Schwarzenegger, there were four other initiatives on the Special Election ballot. All of these were also voted down. Turnout for the election was 40 percent, a 5 percent decline from the recall election that landed Schwarzenegger in office in 2003.

The four initiatives on the ballot that had the support of the Governor included the "Spending Cap Initiative" (Proposition 76), the "Teacher Tenure Initiative" (Proposition 74), the "Redistricting Initiative" (Proposition 77) and the "Union Paycheck Initiative" (Proposition 75).

Proposition 76 was overwhelmingly rejected by voters, with 62 percent of those who went to the polls voting "no" compared to 38 percent voting "yes." The initiative would have significantly limited the ability of the State Legislature to increase budget appropriations and allowed the Governor to impose mid-year budget cuts by executive fiat.

The Republican Party viewed Proposition 76 as a critical stepping-stone in its efforts to further attack government-funded social programs in California. In addition, it wanted to use the "Spending Cap Initiative" to bolster support for similar initiatives in other states.

Voters also dealt a stinging blow to Schwarzenegger's attempt to alter the way in which election districts are drawn in the state through the

"Redistricting Initiative." Sixty percent of those who went to the polls opposed Proposition 77 compared to 40 percent who approved. Like the "Spending Cap Initiative," Proposition 77 was a hobbyhorse of the California Republican Party. Through this initiative, these layers sought to transform the political map in the state, breaking up Democratic electoral majorities.

The geographical distribution of "no" votes in the state's counties reveals that a majority of voters in nearly all of California's diverse regions opposed Proposition 76 and 77. In San Francisco and the surrounding counties, opposition to the "Spending Cap Initiative" was as high as 75-85 percent. In Los Angeles, the state's largest urban area, 66 percent of voters rejected Proposition 76. Apart from a handful of rural counties in the underpopulated mountainous Sierra Nevada region, the only other area where a majority of voters approved Proposition 76 was Orange County. However, even this long-standing Republican stronghold could muster only 56 percent support for the initiative.

The margins of opposition for Propositions 74 and 75 were smaller than those for Proposition 76 and 77. Nonetheless, both were rejected.

Fifty-five percent of voters cast a "no" ballot for the "Teacher Tenure Initiative," which would have increased the time it takes teachers in the public school system to achieve tenure from two to five years. Similarly, Proposition 75, the initiative that would have forced public employee unions to secure the annual written consent of each member prior to using his or her dues towards any political campaign, was rejected by 54 percent of voters.

California's public employee unions and their allies in the Democratic Party spent nearly \$50 million to ensure the defeat of Proposition 75, which up until a

month ago was leading in the polls. Even with this enormous sum of money, the “Union Paycheck Initiative” was only rejected by a margin of 4 percentage points, indicating the depth of distrust that many Californians have for the political agenda of the trade unions.

In addition, voters also rejected those initiatives on the ballot that were not backed by Schwarzenegger.

Proposition 73, which would have required parental notification before a minor could receive an abortion and would have changed the California Constitution to define abortion as the “killing of an unborn child,” was defeated by a vote of 53 percent to 47 percent. Proposition 73 was a favorite of the Christian right, which attempted to manipulate the genuine concern of parents in order to attack a women’s rights.

The two initiatives on the ballot that dealt with prescription drug costs were also voted down. Fifty-nine percent of voters rejected Proposition 78 and a similar number, 61 percent, rejected Proposition 79. Proposition 78 would have created a discount-drug program for low-income individuals that drug companies could join on a voluntary basis. The pharmaceutical industry spent \$80 million in advertisements calling for a “yes” vote on Proposition 78 and a “no” vote on Proposition 79, which would have forced drug companies participating in California’s Medi-Cal program to offer their products at a discounted rate.

Voters also rejected Proposition 80, which if passed would have led to the re-regulation of the energy industry in California. Sixty-six percent of those who went to the polls voted “no” on the initiative, compared to 34 percent voting “yes.”

The opposition to Propositions 79 and 80, which had the support of the trade unions and the Democratic Party, is an expression of the general hostility that ordinary people feel toward the political establishment as a whole. The inability of the unions and the Democrats to rally voters behind these initiatives indicates that the rejection of the Schwarzenegger administration was largely fueled by hostility toward the Governor’s policies and not support for the agenda of the Democratic Party.

The Schwarzenegger administration called the Special Election in June of this year in a last-ditch attempt to shore up the Governor’s declining approval

ratings and force through a series of right-wing measures that could not be passed via the normal political process. By launching a media campaign that portrayed Schwarzenegger as an outsider attempting to clean up politics in Sacramento, the Republican Party believed it could both revitalize the waning support for the Governor and stampede the population into supporting initiatives that would further attack the living standards and democratic rights of working people.

However, this tactic failed. Instead, the Special Election became a referendum on the Schwarzenegger administration and its slavishly pro-business agenda.

On Tuesday evening, the Governor gave a humiliating speech that, while failing to acknowledge his defeat in the election, thanked those who voted against his initiatives for participating in the political process. He made an appeal to his political opponents and the voters who rejected his agenda to put their animosity aside and continue working to solve the state’s problems.

The outcome of the Special Election represents not simply a rebuke of Schwarzenegger’s “Year of Reform” agenda, which he announced with great fanfare in January of this year, but a rejection of right-wing policies as a whole. While the Democratic Party postured as an opponent of the Schwarzenegger administration in the battle over the propositions on the November 8 ballot, it too has pursued right-wing policies in the state for years.

The outcome from Tuesday’s vote will only deepen the political crisis facing Schwarzenegger and the political establishment as a whole, which has no progressive solution to the deteriorating social conditions facing masses of people in California.



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