

US election: Referendum votes reveal social discontent

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More than 200 ballot propositions went to statewide referendum votes November 7 across the United States, with the results showing deep-seated dissatisfaction with the social and economic conditions facing working people.

The most striking result was the approval of a rise in the minimum wage in all six of the states which voted on the issue: Ohio, Missouri, Colorado, Montana, Nevada and Arizona. The approval margins ranged from overwhelming—76 percent in Missouri, 73 percent in Montana, 69 percent in Nevada, 66 percent in Arizona—to relatively narrow—56 percent in Ohio and 53 percent in Colorado.

All six are so-called “red states,” carried by Bush in both the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, making these votes all the more significant. When given a clear opportunity to support an improvement, however limited, in the conditions of the lowest-paid workers, the voters of these Midwestern and mountain states demonstrated their support.

All six measures included indexing provisions which ensure that the minimum wage will continue to rise with the rise in the consumer price index, a feature which the federal minimum wage and most state minimums currently lack, leaving the lowest-paid workers at the mercy of congressional and state legislative majorities for cost-of-living increases.

Ten states now have indexing for their minimum wages, and 28 out of the 50 now require a higher minimum wage than the abysmally low \$5.15 an hour provided under federal law.

Economic grievances were also revealed in the votes in nine states for ballot propositions that limited or barred state and local governments from using the power of eminent domain to take property from private individuals and transfer it to other, more financially

powerful, private interests.

Eminent domain has traditionally been used to take private property, with compensation, for such public uses as building roads, convention centers, schools and so on. Last year’s decision by the US Supreme Court in *Kelo v. New Haven* upheld a city government’s condemnation of homes in a working class neighborhood for the purpose of clearing the land and selling it to a shopping center developer, to increase the city’s tax base.

This reactionary decision has been seized on in a cynical manner by ultra-right groups, using the plight of homeowners and small farmers to enact restrictions on eminent domain that would largely benefit big corporate and real estate interests. Most of the nine referendum propositions were placed on the ballot through the financial support of a single New York City real estate billionaire, who seeks to use the agitation over *Kelo* to overturn state and local zoning laws.

Two referendum votes dealt blows to the Christian fundamentalist campaigns against abortion rights and gay marriage. Voters in South Dakota overturned a law that directly challenged the Supreme Court’s 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision by criminalizing all abortions except where the life of the mother was directly threatened.

Abortion rights supporters collected tens of thousands of signatures on petitions to force the referendum vote after the South Dakota state legislature enacted the law, aiming to make it the basis for a test case of *Roe v. Wade*’s support on the Supreme Court after the addition of two Bush appointees, Chief Justice John Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito.

Although the state legislators who adopted the abortion ban and the governor who signed the bill into law were reelected Tuesday, the bill itself was defeated by a margin of 55-45 percent. There was particular

opposition to the state law's failure to include an exception for rape or incest—essentially requiring a woman to bear the child of such an assault.

There was another defeat for anti-abortion forces in Kansas, where the Republican attorney general, Phill Kline, was defeated for reelection. Kline became notorious last year when he subpoenaed the records of abortion clinics in the state, seeking the names of all teenaged patients younger than 16, suggesting that he would institute prosecutions for statutory rape against their sexual partners.

Voters in Arizona turned down a constitutional amendment defining marriage as between a man and a woman. Gay marriage is still barred by a state law, but the vote was the first defeat for an anti-gay-marriage proposal in 28 statewide votes over the past eight years, an indication of increasing tolerance towards gay relationships and diminishing effectiveness of efforts to whip up bigotry and religious hysteria over the issue.

Seven other states did approve bans on gay marriage, although the margins in Midwestern states like Wisconsin and Missouri were well below those of previous years. Voters in Missouri also narrowly approved a measure to guarantee that all stem cell research deemed legal under federal law would be permitted under state law as well.

California is a special case among the states because of the enormous impact of big money referendum campaigns. Big business interests routinely spend tens of millions of dollars to defeat anti-corporate measures on the ballot in the nation's largest state. This year more than \$600 million was expended on referendum campaigns in California, compared to a total of \$2.6 billion spent on all federal election campaigns nationwide.

The oil industry spent \$95 million to defeat Proposition 87, which would have imposed an oil extraction tax worth \$485 million a year to finance new economic development in the state. The tobacco companies spent \$67 million to defeat a plan to raise taxes on cigarettes by \$2.60 a pack to finance health care improvements, including paying for health care for smokers.

In two states, Ohio and Arizona, referendums to ban smoking in most public facilities passed, despite opposition backed with heavy financial support by R. J. Reynolds Tobacco. Another significant vote came in

Rhode Island, which restored voting rights to former prison inmates who are on probation or parole. Three states, Maine, Nebraska and Oregon, saw the defeat of right-wing backed propositions to restrict state spending.

In all of these referendums, as in the contests for elected office, where Democrats and Republicans captured the vast majority of the votes, the framework of bourgeois politics distorted and confused the political choices facing working people. Besides the enormous sums spent by corporate interests, there is the role of the media, which systematically suppresses any class-based, let alone socialist, analysis of political issues.

The resulting political confusion was perhaps expressed most starkly in Arizona, where voters approved four anti-immigrant referendum propositions, including one declaring English the official language of the state (a slap not only at Hispanics, but at the large Navajo and Hopi Indian population). The same voters defeated an anti-gay referendum, approved a rise in the minimum wage increase, and defeated two Republican congressional candidates, one of them incumbent J. D. Hayworth, who focused their campaigns on demands for draconian border security measures and persecution of "illegal aliens."



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