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Fate of term-limits measure turns on voter perceptions

Voters back proposal if they believe it will reduce legislative terms

SAN JOSE, April 3, 2007 -- The measure to alter term limits for legislators, sponsored by a coalition including the California Chamber of Commerce and California Teachers Association, is highly sensitive to how the issue is described to voters, a new poll by the Survey and Policy Research Institute at San Jose State University demonstrates.

In response to SPRI's survey question on the issue, California voters favor, by a margin of 51-36%, a proposal to allow elected officials to spend no more than 12 years in either the state Assembly or Senate – a reduction from the maximum 14 years legislators may now spend in the two houses combined.

That result is similar to a report from David Binder Research, which conducted a poll for the term limits coalition. Binder, whose question was similar to SPRI's, found the measure leading 59-33%.

But both surveys conflict with a result from the respected Public Policy Institute of California which found voters strongly opposed to the measure by a margin of 66-29%.

PPIC's survey question did not explicitly point out that the measure would reduce a legislator's total maximum term in Sacramento. But it did explain that the number of years a legislator could serve in either house would be 12 years rather than six or eight.

It is clear from the results that how voters understand the issue will be critical to whether the measure passes or fails.

If voters perceive the measure primarily as *decreasing* the total time an official may spend in the Legislature, they are in favor, as SPRI's survey question demonstrated.

If voters perceive the measure principally as *increasing* the amount of time an official may spend in the Assembly or Senate, they are strongly opposed – as PPIC's survey question found.

Since the measure would do both things at once, its success appears to hinge on which message dominates voters' perceptions and, perhaps, how it is titled and summarized for the ballot by Democratic Attorney General Jerry Brown.

SPRI surveyed 574 individuals identified as voters as part of its quarterly California Consumer Confidence Survey, March 26-30 in English, Spanish and Vietnamese. The margin of error for all voters in the survey is plus-or-minus 4 percentage points.

"Voters like term limits," said SPRI Director Phil Trounstine. "If they see this measure as a way for legislators to lengthen their terms, it's likely to fail. If they see the measure as a further limit on legislative terms, it stands a chance of passing. It all comes down to how the message is framed."

Framing of the issue is so significant that in response to SPRI's question Republicans were even more supportive (50-38%) than were Democrats (47-39%). And among independents, the measure, as described by SPRI, led 66-25%.

Moreover, while liberals are divided 43-32% on the measure as described by SPRI, moderates favor it 52-38% and conservatives overwhelmingly support it 64-27%.

SPRI asked voters the following question:

“Under current law, an elected official may serve up to six years in the California Assembly and up to eight years in the California State Senate. That's a total of 14 years in the state Legislature. Would you vote for or against a ballot measure that would reduce the number of years an elected official may spend in the state Legislature to 12 years -- but which would allow that official to spend all 12 years in either the Assembly or the Senate?”

The result was 51% in favor, 36% opposed and 13% undecided or refused.

PPIC's question asked:

“Under current term limits, a legislator is allowed to serve six years in the State Assembly and eight years in the State Senate. Would you favor or oppose a change in term limits that would allow members to serve up to 12 years of total legislative service in either branch?”

The result was 29% in favor, 66% opposed and 5% undecided. (In another question, PPIC found that more than six in 10 voters say term limits for legislators are “a good thing.”)

The question by David Binder Research asked:

“This initiative would change California's law regulating term limits for members of the California State Assembly and State Senate. Currently, an individual is allowed by law to serve no more than six years in the State Assembly and no more than eight years in the State Senate – for a total of 14 years. This initiative would reduce the total number of years a person can serve in the state Legislature from 14 years to 12 years and it would also allow legislators to serve all 12 years in either the Assembly or the Senate as long as voters re-elect them for each term. If the election were held today, would you vote yes or no on this initiative?”

The result reported was 59% in favor, 33% opposed and 8% undecided or refused.

Although a bipartisan coalition is supporting the term-limits measure, Democratic Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez is leading the effort and his chief consultant is directing the campaign. While the measure reduces the overall time a legislator may spend in office, its principal aim, according to Núñez, is to increase the length of time a member may serve in either the Assembly or Senate.

“You can't do the job effectively if you can't be there for a reasonable amount of time, to have a real grasp on the issues,” Núñez told newspaper publishers recently. “We ought to relax those terms, and I think we ought to do it sooner rather than later.”

California has limited legislative terms since Proposition 140 was approved by the voters in 1990.

While limiting total legislative service to 12 years in the future, a provision in the measure would also allow some current legislators, who normally would be termed out of office next year, to extend their time in office beyond the 12-year limit. Those would include Núñez and Democratic Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata.