

# Public Approval for State Government Institutions

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Conclusions are those of the authors, not necessarily those of the Institute of Public Policy of the Truman School of Public Affairs

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## Introduction

There are a number of state level institutions designed to limit the impact of special interests on government or to facilitate citizen participation in government. These include legislative term limits, ballot initiatives, governors' line item veto power and public funding for legislative and gubernatorial candidates. While most of these state government institutions are fairly common around the United States (see Table 1), relatively little is known about Americans' opinion of them. This policy note explores Americans' views on these features as well as the relationship between survey respondents' partisanship and their approval of these state government institutions.

To assess the public's attitudes on these political institutions, researchers at the Harry S Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri conducted a national survey of 1,000 adults. The survey was administered as part of the 2007 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), a 10,000 person survey conducted through

the collaborative efforts of a consortium of universities.<sup>1</sup> The 2007 CCES was administered in November 2007 by Polimetrix, an Internet survey firm located in Palo Alto, California.

## Approval of State Government Institutions

Term limits, ballot measures, and line item veto power are relatively popular among survey respondents (see Table 1). Sizable majorities of the public approve of these institutions, with 40% strongly approving of term limits, 31% strongly approving of ballot measures, and about 24% strongly approving of line item veto power for the governor. Respondents are nearly evenly split in their approval of public funding for state legislative or gubernatorial candidates (approximately 35% either for or against, with 30% neither approving nor disapproving). Overall, it appears that there is broad support for measures that are believed to limit legislative power, although there is certainly some variation based on partisanship, as is discussed below.

Table 1: Summary of public approval for state institutions

	Strongly Approve	Approve	Neither	Disapprove	Strongly Disapprove	# States with the Institution*
Approval of state legislative term limits (n = 998)	40.1%	32.5%	16.7%	7.8%	2.9%	15
Approval of ballot measures (n = 988)	30.5%	38.6%	25.2%	4.6%	1.2%	24
Approval of line item veto power for governor (n = 997)	24.3%	32.6%	26.9%	11.9%	4.3%	44
Approval of public funding for gubernatorial candidates (n = 998)	15.1%	19.8%	28.6%	20.3%	16.1%	16
Approval of public funding for state legislative candidates (n = 996)	14.6%	19.7%	29.6%	20.4%	15.8%	8

\*Source: National Conference of State Legislatures.



### Approval of Term Limits for State Legislators

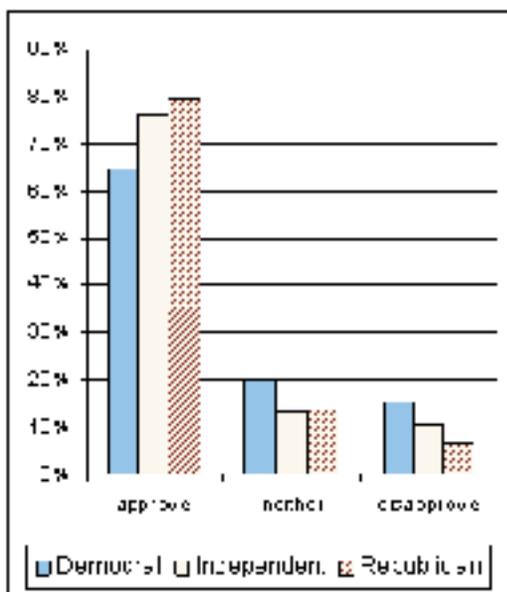
Proponents of term limits argued that they would eliminate career politicians and the influence of special interests from the legislature.<sup>2</sup> Term limit advocates also claimed that term limits would increase the legislature’s diversity with more women and minorities serving.

Twenty-one states have passed term limits since 1992, although 6 states have repealed term limits since 1997. Across 15 states during the 1990s, term limits passed with an average of two-thirds of the vote, and several surveys have found that recent support for term limits is around 70%.<sup>3</sup>

Several states saw high rates of turnover in just one election cycle as the term limits began to take effect. For example, Missouri lost 45% of its legislators in 2003 because of term limits, while Michigan termed out more than two-thirds of its senators that year.<sup>4</sup> The high turnover and relative inexperience of new members can tip the balance of power towards the executive branch or towards lobbyists.<sup>5</sup> When the first generation of legislators were termed-out in Missouri, the new leadership was less experienced and some institutional continuity was lost.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, some research has found that term limits can actually lead to legislatures that are less responsive to citizens, which would suggest that term limits are counterproductive from the general public’s perspective.<sup>7</sup>

While 80% of Republican respondents either strongly approve or approve of term limits, just 65% of Democratic respondents felt the same way (See Figure 1). Democratic respondents were also twice as likely to disapprove of term limits compared to their Republican counterparts (15% vs. 7%). Nevertheless, a large majority (nearly 73%) of respondents approve of term limits.

**Figure 1: Approval of term limits for state legislators by party identification**



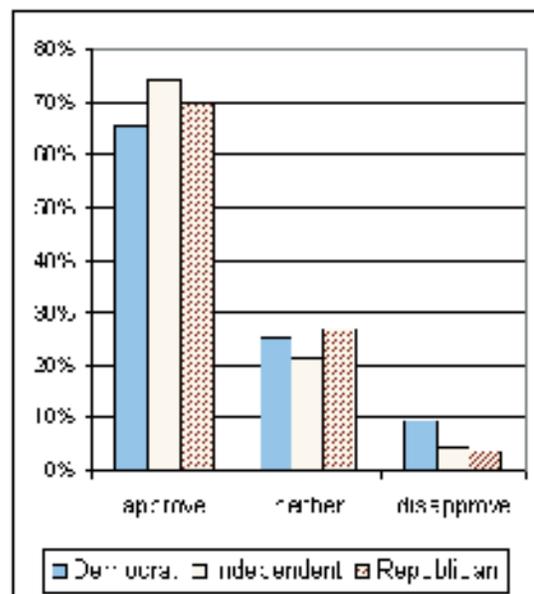
### Approval of Ballot Measures (Initiatives)

A ballot initiative is a measure that reaches the ballot as the result of a citizen petition process and not from the state legislature.<sup>8</sup> Twenty-four states currently allow for ballot initiatives. Most states that have initiatives passed laws allowing for them in the early 20th century. During the Progressive era, the ballot measure process was seen as a way to combat corruption and give citizens an opportunity for direct democracy in the face of powerful industries. Generally, more states in the West have ballot measures than elsewhere in the country, although there are a few Northeastern states that also allow for them.

There are several types of ballot measures allowed in states. Most states with ballot initiatives permit both direct constitutional and direct statute measures on the ballot. A few states only allow indirect constitutional or statute measures, meaning that the initiative must be sent to the legislature before being placed on the ballot.<sup>9</sup> Requirements for the number of signatures and the length of time allowed to collect signatures also vary by state.

Of all of the state institutions evaluated in this survey, partisanship appears to have the least influence on approval of ballot measures as all three groups show strong support for them (see Figure 2). Approximately three out of four Independents approve or strongly approve of ballot initiatives, while only two out of three Democratic respondents do. Democratic respondents were the most likely to disapprove, but only 9% disapproved or strongly disapproved, compared to 4% of both Independents and Republicans.

**Figure 2: Approval of ballot measures by party identification**



### Approval of Gubernatorial Line Item Vetoes

Governors in 44 states have the ability to strike lines from appropriations bills without vetoing the entire bill. The intention of this gubernatorial power is to prevent the legislature from appropriating funds to special interests or pork barrel projects. In effect, the line item veto serves to increase gubernatorial power relative to the legislature. There are three main types of line item vetoes. A governor can veto funding for a particular line item, veto funding for an entire program or agency, or reduce appropriation amounts at his or her discretion.<sup>10</sup>

In general, nearly 56% of the survey respondents either approved or strongly approved of line item veto power, but there is a partisan divide among respondents. As seen in Figure 3, the approval rating is driven by Republican and Independent respondents (71% and 60% approving or strongly approving). Only 40% of Democratic respondents approve of the line item veto, while 28% disapprove or strongly disapprove.

The stronger Republican and Independent approval ratings may reflect fiscal conservatism among those respondents, or a preference for reducing costly entitlement or education programs that constitute a sizeable portion of state budgets. Some research has also suggested that line item vetoes have been used for partisan gain by reducing budget appropriations to certain programs that the governor dislikes.<sup>11</sup>

### Approval of Public Funding for Governors and State Legislators

Currently 16 states offer some public funding for gubernatorial candidates.<sup>12</sup> Eight states have public

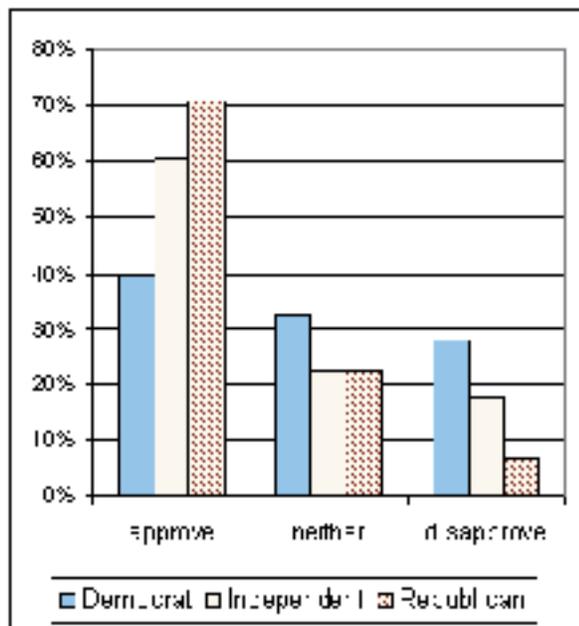
funding for state legislators, either as partial public financing (Hawaii, Minnesota, Nebraska and Wisconsin) or full public financing (also called “Clean Elections,” in Arizona, Connecticut, Maine and New Jersey).<sup>13</sup>

Some research indicates that because of the low level of media coverage, incumbents in the state legislature have a significant advantage over competitors. Gierzynski and Breaux evaluated spending on state legislative campaigns, and found that spending by challengers was more effective dollar for dollar than spending by incumbents.<sup>14</sup> This finding suggests that public funding for legislative candidates could reduce the incumbent advantage and make elections more competitive.

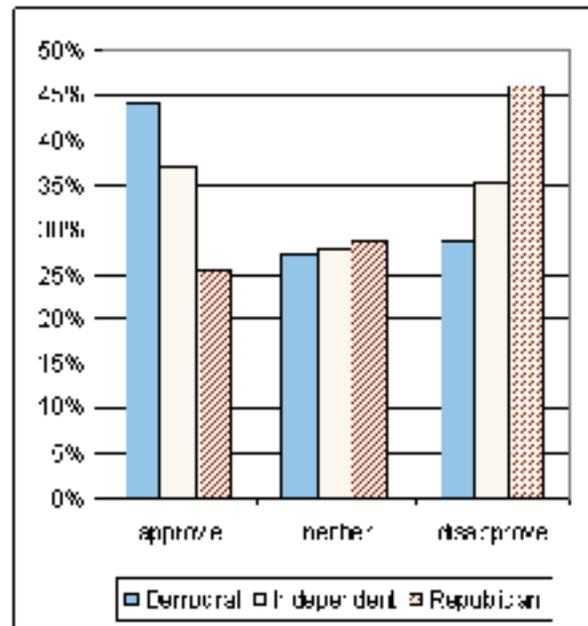
Public funding approval levels are nearly identical between gubernatorial and state legislative campaigns (see Figures 4 & 5). Democratic respondents are more likely to approve of public funding while Republican respondents are more likely to disapprove. Independents are nearly evenly split in their approval for public funding of both types of candidates.

There are two competing views of public funding that may influence responses here. First, proponents of public funding consider it as a way to prevent candidates from accepting special interest donations that might buy their votes on certain legislation, a view more often championed by Democrats. On the other hand, some view public funding as wasteful spending that has not proven to be effective in improving citizen trust in government,<sup>15</sup> and this opinion may be more likely to be held by Republican respondents. Further analysis is necessary to determine the extent to which these two viewpoints explain the partisan variation in approval ratings for public funding.

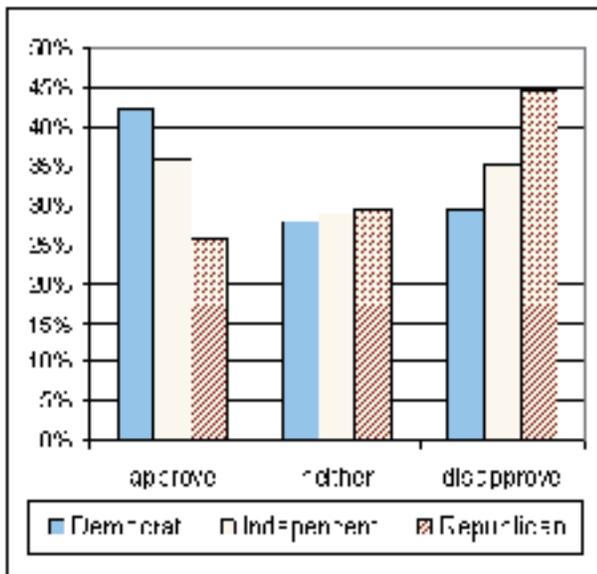
**Figure 3: Approval of gubernatorial line item veto by party identification**



**Figure 4: Approval of public funding for gubernatorial candidates by party identification**



**Figure 5: Approval of public funding for state legislative candidates by party identification**



## Conclusions

Public approval of state government institutions corresponds with party identification. The partisan divide is clearest in terms of public funding for candidates and the gubernatorial line item veto. Democratic respondents are more likely to approve of public funding for both gubernatorial and state legislative candidates, while Republican respondents are much more likely to approve of gubernatorial line item vetoes. Republicans most strongly approve of legislative term limits, and Independents are the most likely to approve of ballot initiatives, although not by large margins. Further analysis is necessary to determine whether informed respondents (i.e. those who know if their state has ballot initiatives, term limits for legislators or public funding) have different approval ratings than respondents who are not knowledgeable about these tools in their own states.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>1</sup> More information about the CCES project can be found at <http://web.mit.edu/polisci/portl/cces/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Richardson, L., Valentine, D., Daily Stokes, S., (2005). Assessing the impact of term limits in Missouri, *State and Local Government Review*, Vol. 37, No. 3: 177-92.

<sup>3</sup> Weissert C. & K. Halperin (2007) “The paradox of term limit support: To know them is NOT to love them,” *Political Research Quarterly* 60:516.

<sup>4</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/legismgt/ABOUT/termlimit.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Weissert C. & K. Halperin (2007) “The paradox of term limit support: To know them is NOT to love them,” *Political Research Quarterly* 60:516.

<sup>6</sup> Richardson, L., Valentine, D., Daily Stokes, S., (2005). Assessing the impact of term limits in Missouri, *State and Local Government Review*, Vol. 37, No. 3: 177-92.

<sup>7</sup> Weissert C. & K. Halperin (2007) “The paradox of term limit support: To know them is NOT to love them,” *Political Research Quarterly* 60:516.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/legismgt/elect/dbintro.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Bowler, S., Donovan, T., Tolbert, C. (1998). *Citizens as Legislators: Direct democracy in the United States*, Ohio State University Press.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/fiscal/lbptables/lbpc6t3.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Abney, G., Lauth, T., (1985). “The line-item veto in the states: An instrument for fiscal restraint or an instrument for partisanship?” *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 45, No. 3, pp. 372-377.

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.ncsl.org/programs/legismgt/about/state\\_pub\\_fin.htm](http://www.ncsl.org/programs/legismgt/about/state_pub_fin.htm)

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.ncsl.org/programs/legismgt/about/state\\_pub\\_fin.htm](http://www.ncsl.org/programs/legismgt/about/state_pub_fin.htm)

<sup>14</sup> Gierzynski, A., and Breaux, D. (1991). Money and votes in state legislative elections, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 203-217.

<sup>15</sup> Primo, D., and Milyo, J., (2006). Campaign finance laws and political efficacy: Evidence from the states, *Election Law Journal* 5 (1): 23-39

<sup>16</sup> See Konisky, D., Milyo, J., and Richardson, L. (2008) “Citizen trust in state government institutions” Presented at the 2008 Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.

## Author Biography

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