When Mass Opinion Goes to the Ballot Box: A National Assessment of State Level Issue Opinion and Ballot Initiative Results

Jonathan Robinson, Catalist
Chris Warshaw, George Washington University
John Sides, Vanderbilt University

- Important recent work on disconnect between elites and voters on public policy preferences (Broockman & Skovron 2018; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger & Stokes 2018)

- "Public opinion is those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed" -- V.O. Key

- Desire to explore the external validity of survey-based estimates of public opinion on issues

Data on all contested ballot initiatives from 1958 to 2020 gathered from:

- Ballotpedia
- Michigan State University's IPPSR's compilation of National Conference of State Legislatures' (NCSL) "Ballot Measures Database"

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Data from all national surveys with issue questions we could reasonably match wording for to ballot initiatives

Sources:
- Roper Center (e.g., Gallup, CBS/NY Times, Pew, etc.)
- American National Election Studies
- Cooperative Congressional Election Studies
- Nationscape

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☐ Downscaled opinion to state-level using dynamic MRP models:

  ▪ Dynamic MRP model:
    - Individual-level predictors: Urbanity, race, gender, education
    - State-level predictors: Economic and cultural ideology of state publics (Caughey & Warshaw 2018)
    - Dynamic linear model (DLM) to pool information overtime
  ▪ Estimated via dgmrp function in *dgo* package in *R*

☐ National means in dynamic MRP model closely track trends in national surveys.

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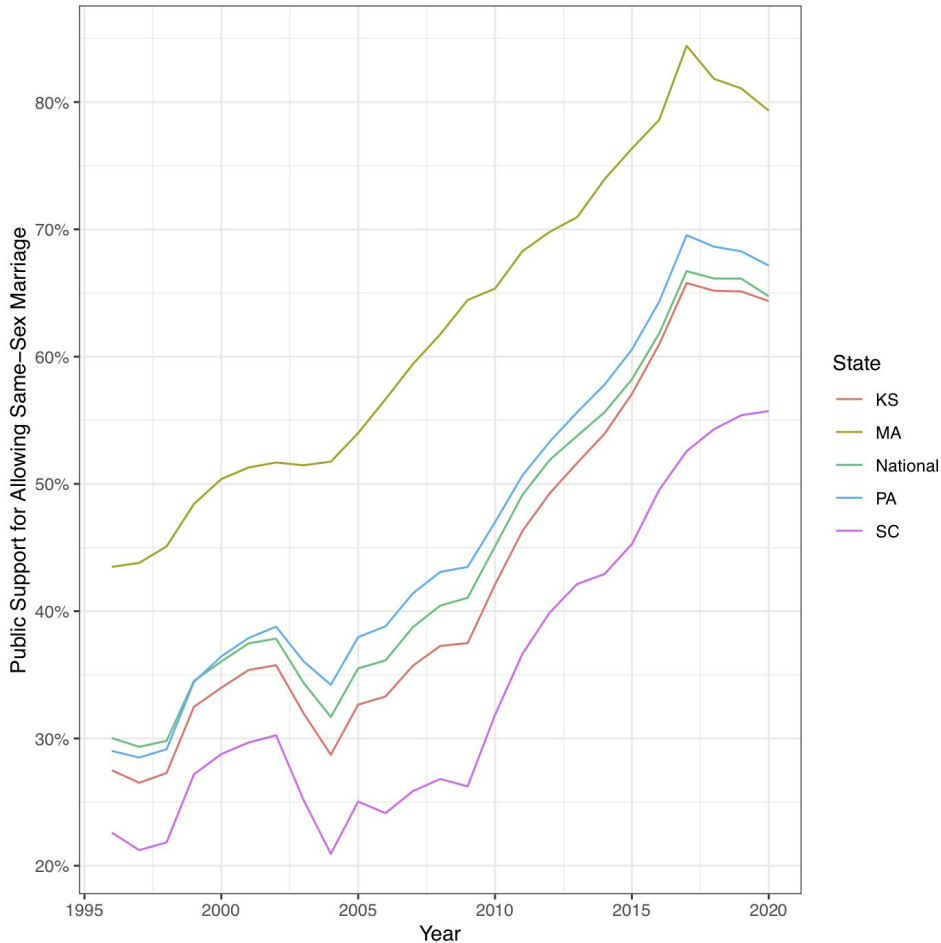
- The resulting dataset contains information on ~200 issue polling and ballot initiatives pairs across 11 "topic areas" over the last 60 years, merged with other metadata

- Examples: abortion, marijuana, minimum wage, same-sex marriage, guns, etc

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Support for Gun Control Seems Strong. But It May Be Softer Than It Looks.

The new activists are hoping the old patterns of weak support will change.

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A sign in Los Angeles was prepared for a March for Our Lives rally on Saturday. Mario Tama/Getty Images

By **Margot Sanger-Katz**

March 24, 2018

When you ask Americans in a poll whether they support universal background checks for gun purchases, huge majorities say yes.

Ask them for a specific vote for such a legal change, and that support drops off.

In recent years, there have been three true tests of this question. In Washington State and Nevada, voters said yes. In Maine, they said no. Ballot measures in all three earned a much smaller vote share than the initial polling suggested.

The results illustrate the political challenges facing the student-led activists who are marching in Washington and other cities this weekend to push for stronger gun laws.

While a wide range of gun control laws appear popular in polls, support may soften once details emerge and they're subjected to a robust political debate. In survey after survey, background checks are the most popular gun control measure, with support frequently over 80 percent. A recent Quinnipiac poll, taken after the deadly shootings last month at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, Fla., had support at 97 percent. Background checks are popular among Democrats and Republicans, gun owners and those without guns.

MRP estimate of support for background checks in Nevada in 2016: **86%**

Vote share Question 1 received at the ballot box in Nevada in 2016: **50.4%**

"On the issue of gun regulation, do you support or oppose background checks for all sales, including at gun shows and over the Internet?" (CCES, 2016)

"Shall Chapter 202 of the Nevada Revised Statutes be amended to prohibit, except in certain circumstances, a person from selling or transferring a firearm to another person unless a federally-licensed dealer first conducts a federal background check on the potential buyer or transferee?"

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- Correlation between public opinion and ballot initiative results
- Mean Absolute Error (MAE)
- Bias
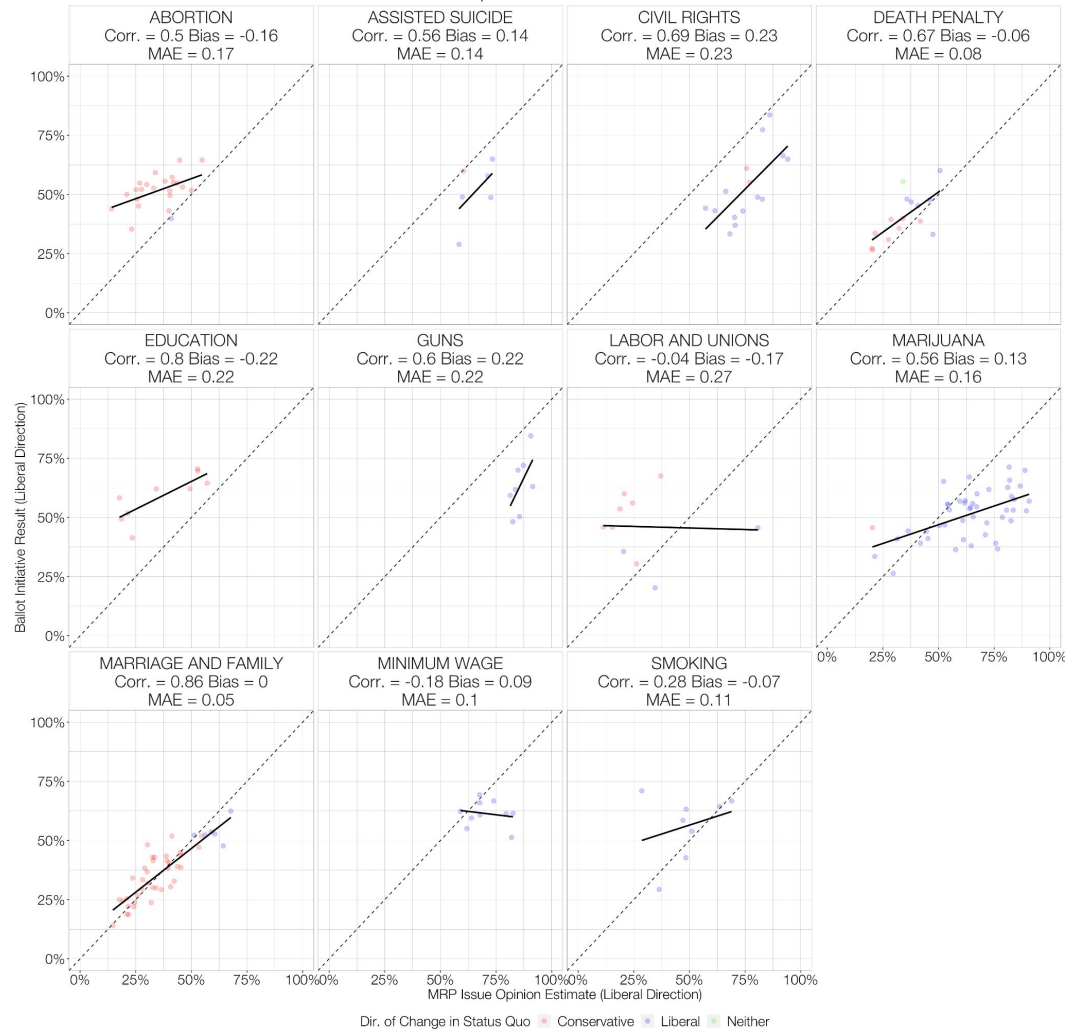- Analysis of residual differences between public opinion and initiative outcomes

Descriptive Results

MRP Issue Opinion Estimates vs. Initiative Results
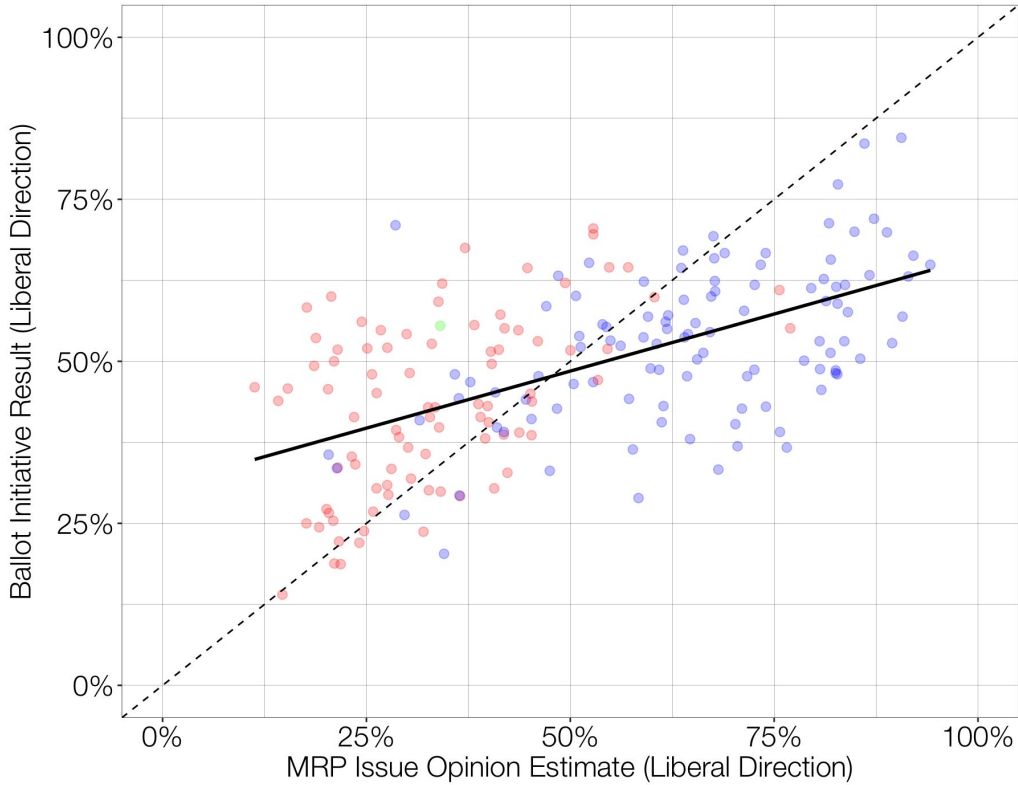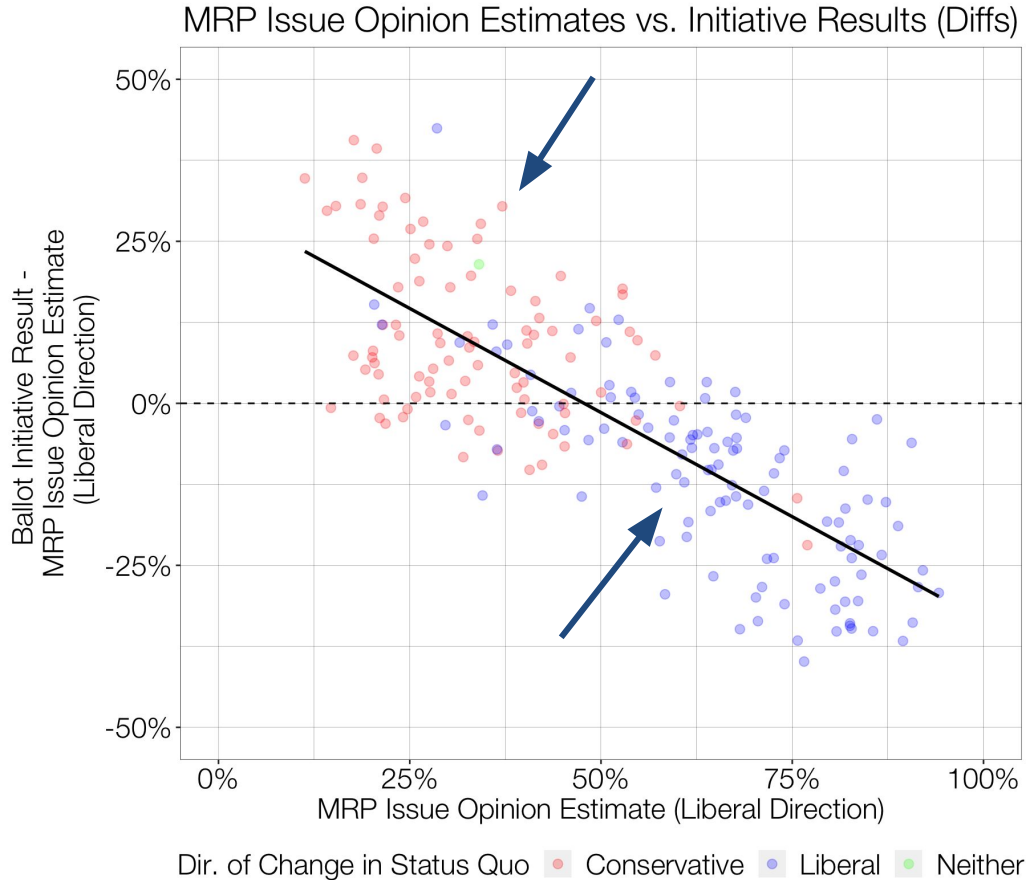
Dir. of Change in Status Quo ● Conservative ● Liberal ● Neither

MRP Issue Opinion Estimates vs. Initiative Results

ABORTION
Corr. = 0.5 Bias = -0.16
MAE = 0.17

ASSISTED SUICIDE
Corr. = 0.56 Bias = 0.14
MAE = 0.14

CIVIL RIGHTS
Corr. = 0.69 Bias = 0.23
MAE = 0.23

DEATH PENALTY
Corr. = 0.67 Bias = -0.06
MAE = 0.08

EDUCATION
Corr. = 0.8 Bias = -0.22
MAE = 0.22

GUNS
Corr. = 0.6 Bias = 0.22
MAE = 0.22

LABOR AND UNIONS
Corr. = -0.04 Bias = -0.17
MAE = 0.27

MARIJUANA
Corr. = 0.56 Bias = 0.13
MAE = 0.16

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY
Corr. = 0.86 Bias = 0
MAE = 0.05

MINIMUM WAGE
Corr. = -0.18 Bias = 0.09
MAE = 0.1

SMOKING
Corr. = 0.28 Bias = -0.07
MAE = 0.11

Ballot Initiative Result (Liberal Direction)

MRP Issue Opinion Estimate (Liberal Direction)

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	Dependent variable:			
	Ballot Initiative Result (% Liberal)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Public Opinon (% Lib)	0.488***	0.469***	0.473***	0.397***
	(0.050)	(0.054)	(0.058)	(0.073)
Initiative shifts SQ in Lib Direction	−0.025	−0.031	−0.039	−0.064**
	(0.021)	(0.025)	(0.026)	(0.030)
Opinion Question in Lib Direction	−0.095***	−0.054	−0.048	0.013
	(0.020)	(0.036)	(0.037)	(0.047)
Constant	0.327***			
	(0.021)			
Topic FE		X	X	X
State FE			X	X
Year FE				X
Observations	200	200	200	200
R^2	0.420	0.585	0.715	0.824
Adjusted R^2	0.408	0.541	0.593	0.647

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MRP Issue Opinion Estimates vs. Initiative Results (Diffs)

MRP Issue Opinion Estimates vs. Initiative Results (Diffs)

MRP Issue Opinion Estimates vs.
Initiative Results (Absolute Diffs)
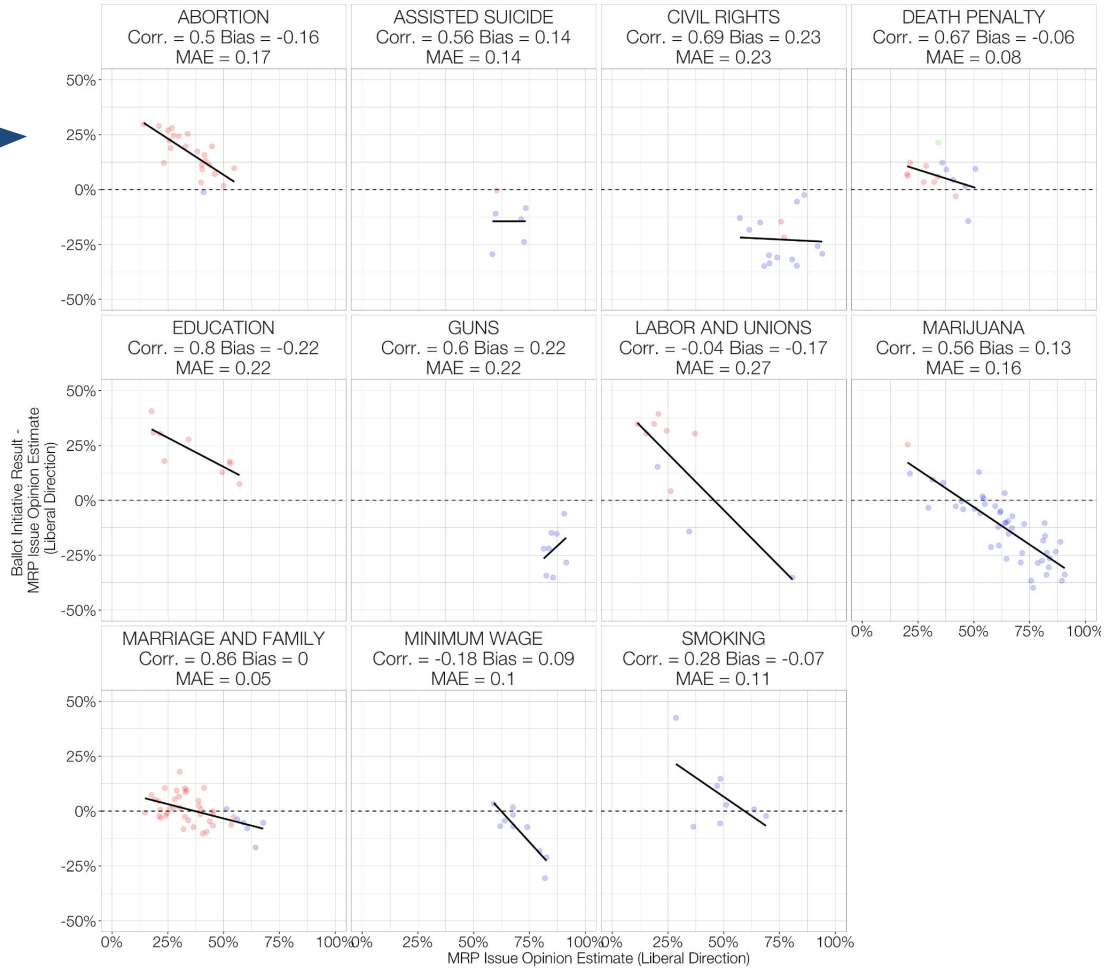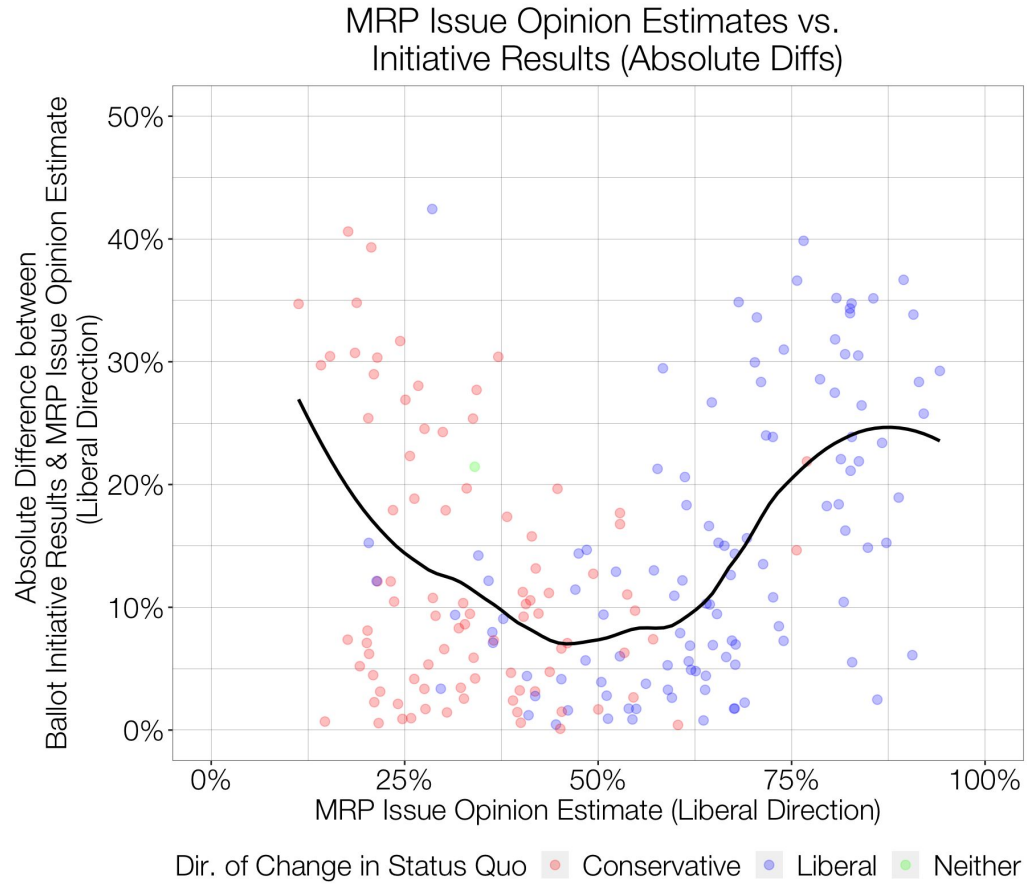
- There is a modest relationship between issue polling and ballot initiative results overall and within topic, although the strength of relationship varies across topics.

- The bias seems to be similar for all ballot initiatives in a particular topic.

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Due to the important and under-explored status quo bias in public opinion as well as initiative voting (Dyck & Pearson-Merkowitz 2018), we see bigger discrepancies when:

(1) opinion is lopsided in one direction and

(2) the initiative attempts to change policy in that direction

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- Strong (though not perfect) correlation between public opinion in polls and ballot initiative results

- No global bias in initiatives vis-a-vis polls

- Suggestive evidence that error/bias in relationship between initiatives and polls driven by:

  - Orientation of polling question

  - Change in the direction of status quo in initiative

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☐ Expand universe of ballot initiatives matched to public opinion

☐ Explore features of electoral context that may drive errors

☐ Examine role of TV ads and initiative spending

- Limited evidence from field experiments that ballot initiative persuasion effects are larger than in other contexts (Broockman & Kalla 2017)

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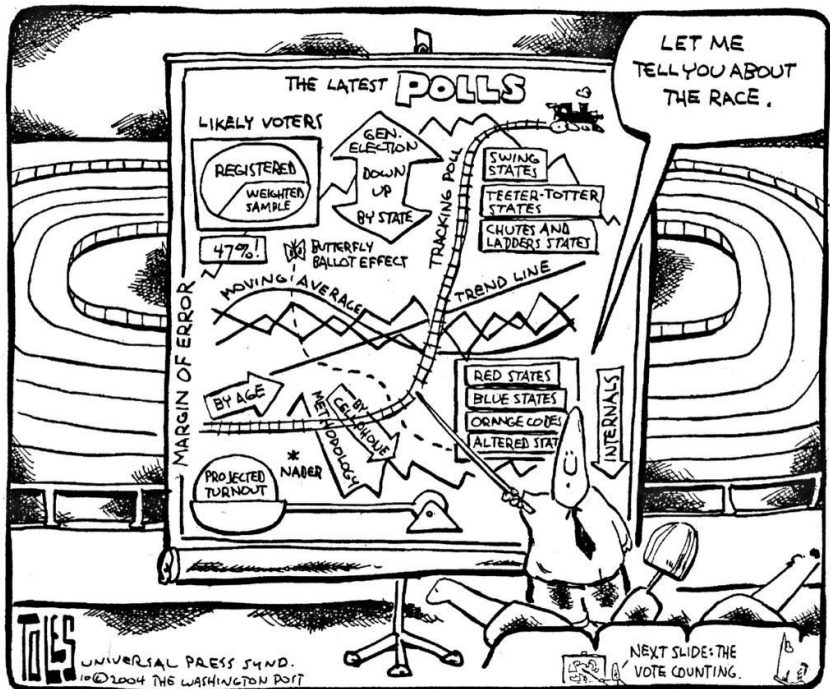
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Appendix

Outlook · Perspective

Ballot measures don't tell us anything about what voters really want

With unlimited spending and little organized opposition, they're nothing like other elections.

Protesters in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., ask McDonald's to raise minimum wages to $15. Florida voters approved a ballot measure setting that as the state minimum this month, even as President Trump won the state. (Joe Raedle/Getty Images)

By **Sasha Issenberg**

Sasha Issenberg is the author of "The Engagement: America's Quarter-Century Struggle Over Same-Sex Marriage," which will

MRP Issue Opinion Estimates vs.
Initiative Results (Diffs)

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