4-1-1989

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Why the Initiatives Failed: Electoral Trends and the Female Vote

Matthew Holland

Three things seemed likely to Utah voters in the early summer of 1988: Michael Dukakis would be their next President, Ted Wilson would be their next Governor, and the 1988 Utah tax initiatives would pass with overwhelming support. But on November 8, 1988, Dukakis was glad he had a job in Boston, Wilson offered congratulations to a surprised Norm Bangerter, and the initiatives were defeated by the same margin with which they were originally favored to pass. There has been, and will continue to be, considerable discussion about the upsets of Dukakis and Wilson, but few are asking, "What happened to the initiatives?" Some answers to that question can be determined by analyzing the current theories about the politics of direct legislation, considering some new research on demographic factors that influenced this year's initiative election, and studying the various campaign tactics both sides used on this issue.

To place an initiative on the ballot, Utah State law requires that a petition be submitted with a number of signatures equaling ten percent of the vote for the last gubernatorial election in two-thirds of the counties. According to this formula, proposed petitions for the 1988 ballot needed about sixty thousand signatures. Last spring three initiatives -- A, B, and C -- were submitted with the necessary endorsements. Initiative A was a tax and spending limitation which would have lowered limited property taxes. Initiative B would have reduced income taxes and the taxes on sales, motor fuel, and tobacco to 1986 levels. Initiative C would have given tax credit to parents who wanted to send their children to private schools.
In June 1988 a KSL/Deseret News poll conducted by Dan Jones and Associates (hereafter referred to as the Jones poll) reported that 56% of Utah residents (not necessarily registered voters) favored Initiative A, 23% opposed it, and 21% were undecided. According to the Jones poll, Initiative B had the best chance of winning: 58% said they were in favor, 34% were opposed, and 9% were undecided. The public seemed less enthusiastic about Initiative C, but it was still favored to pass, with a margin of 51% for, 41% against, and 9% undecided.

The question as to why the initiatives failed after starting with such great support is further complicated by an examination of the attitudes of the Utah electorate the day of the election. According to the KBYU Utah Colleges Exit poll (hereafter referred to as the KBYU poll) conducted the day of the election by Drs. David Magleby and Howard Christensen of Brigham Young University, 61% of voting Utahns believed property taxes were too high, only 29.5% believed taxes were about right, and a smattering of others either felt they were too low or did not have an opinion.

The KBYU poll indicated at least 40% of the voters in Utah felt "tax cuts were good for other states," 30% disagreed with that statement and 29% did not know. Results of the poll also showed a vast majority of the voting public -- 92% -- believed there was at least "some" to a "great deal" of waste in Utah government. Probably the major argument of the groups supporting the initiatives was that this legislation was needed because bureaucrats were squandering public funds.

Some have tried to explain the defeat of the initiative process. However, the KBYU poll seems to disprove that theory. A question on the poll defined the process as one where "citizens can write laws which voters can reject or pass thus bypassing
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the legislature," and asked voters how they felt about it. A clear majority -- 65% of the voters in Utah -- felt the initiative process was a "good thing," only 12% thought it was a "bad thing," 8% said it made "no difference" and 13% said they "did not know."

Despite these general attitudes that the process is good, taxes are too high, there is waste in government, and tax cuts were good for other states, two-thirds of Utah voters cast ballots against the tax initiatives. To determine why the initiatives failed in the midst of circumstances that seemed so favorable to their passage one should probably start with a brief study of the current hypothesis about voting behavior on direct legislation. Dr. David Magleby, professor of Political Science and Public Opinion at Brigham Young University, has done extensive research and writing on the topic of direct legislation. I will identify several determinants that Dr. Magleby suggests influence the vote on ballot propositions and show how Utah's 1988 initiative election and campaign support his thesis.

First of all, "there is a predictable movement from general support for the proposition in the early campaign to its rejection as the campaign proceeds" (Magleby 1984, 170). Professor Magleby's reasoning is that at the start of the campaign "most voters are willing to state a preference for or against a proposition even if they know very little about it" (1984, 170). Therefore an issue that is currently popular -- like tax cuts -- has an early appeal but in time as the campaign moves on and the shortcomings and problems of the initiative become more and more evident, support wanes. The 1988 initiatives in Utah followed that natural trend of early appeal, followed by steadily decreasing support which is characteristic of most initiatives.

Part of the reason for such a high frequency of "mind-change" on the issue is because voters on
propositions tend to be "less sure of their voting intentions, less knowledgeable about the proposition contests, and probably more susceptible to campaign appeals" (Magleby 1984, 172). As a result they usually vote for the side "that spends the most money" (Magleby 1984, 145), is "endorsed by the media elite" (Magleby 1984, 145), and "best defines the issue" (Magleby 1984, 168).

Mickey Gallavin, an advertising consultant with Harris and Love Inc., Advertising hired by Tax Payers for Utah (the group which mobilized to defeat the initiatives), estimates that approximately $350,000 was spent on the campaign against the initiatives. Mills Crenshaw, a local radio talk show host and leading member of the Tax Limitation Coalition (which fought for passage of the initiatives), estimates their group probably spent around $50,000. These figures vary somewhat depending on the source of information, but it is safe to say that the anti-initiative group outspent the proponents of the initiatives by at least three to one.

Tax Payers for Utah almost had a monopoly on media and elite endorsements. According to Mickey Gallavin, the campaign strategy was that each week a well known public figure in Utah representing a particular organization would make a public announcement in opposition to the initiatives. Republican Senator Orrin Hatch, former Democratic Governor Scott Matheson, Salt Lake County Sheriff Pete Hayward and a host of other visible Utahns discouraged other Utahns to vote for the initiatives. The only noticeable public figure endorsements for the initiatives were from the above mentioned Mills Crenshaw and Merrill Cook, the Independent candidate for Governor. Neither could be considered two of the more conspicuous citizens of the state.

The principal news media in the state -- the Salt Lake Tribune, the Deseret News, the Ogden Standard
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Examiner, KSL television and radio, and KUTV television -- all publicly took a position in opposition to the initiatives. The only media publication to come out with an editorial opinion in support of the initiatives, according to Mickey Gallavin, was a newspaper in Manti, Utah. The amount of money spent, the quality and quantity of media opposition and the number of elite endorsements were undoubtedly keys to the success in defeating the initiatives.

According to findings from the KBYU poll, the opponents of the initiatives also did a better job at "defining the issue," and the side which can do that "usually wins" (Magleby 1984, 168). Several themes from both sides were publicized as a way of defining the issue. The Tax Limitation Coalition group accused the government of waste and mismanagement, which the KBYU poll showed most people agreed with to some degree. Their corollary to this accusation was that because there is so much waste, tax cuts would streamline the government and improve the economy. Therefore "prosperity follows tax cuts." According to the KBYU exit poll, 40% of the voters believed that idea but 47% did not.

Those fighting the initiatives realized that the majority of the electorate felt tax cuts in general were needed. Deciding they could not win by suggesting tax cuts per se would be damaging to Utah, they pushed the theme that perhaps some kind of tax cuts were necessary but these particular initiatives "go too far." The KBYU poll indicated that 63% of the voters believed this theme while 31% did not. Perhaps because of (or at least in addition to) their ability to outspend and gather more visible support than their opponents, those working to defeat the initiatives were more effective in convincing the public of their point of view.

These theories, facts and figures indicate a few
of the reasons the initiatives failed in 1988. However, results from the Jones and KBYU polls suggest that there were also some important demographic factors which influenced this election, the most notable of which was gender. In June 1988 the Jones poll showed that only 17% of women were planning to vote against Initiative A while 30% of men indicated they would vote against it. However, on November 5, 1988, just three days before the election, 68% of women, a decisive majority, said they would check a "No" on the initiatives and 57% of men anticipated they would vote "No" as well. This means that women voting against the initiatives increased by 50% whereas male support for the propositions increased by 17%. This pattern was consistent on all three initiatives, but it was more evident on A and B than it was on C. The younger voters (ages 18-34) demonstrated a similar phenomenon compared to the older age groups (although the frequency of change was not as substantial as it was for women, it was still significant).

It is also interesting to note that the Jones poll showed that demographics like income, party affiliation, ideology and education -- which are usually the most important influences on voting behavior -- did not make much difference on the initiative vote. In other words, in June 1988 a roughly equal majority of both Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, those who made over $60,000 a year and those who make $20,000, and college graduates and those with an eighth grade education were planning to vote for the initiatives. In November 1988 the same groups were equally opposed to the legislation. Why such a disparity, then, between men and women on this issue? This question demonstrates the utility of public opinion polls. With data from the KBYU poll it is possible to examine the similarities and
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differences of the influences on the voting behavior of both men and women.

According to the KBYU poll, 64% of male voters felt they paid a great deal of attention to the initiatives and 66% of women said they did as well. Thus men and women were equally attentive to the issue. An exact parity -- 49% -- of both male and female voters, said they felt that the tax cuts would make intrusions into state services. Men and women were fairly equal in how much they thought about the initiatives; 28% of men said they thought a great deal about the legislation and 23% of women said they did too. Both men and women agreed that television and newspaper were their most important sources of information on the initiatives. It seems that neither sex was quicker to make up their mind; roughly an equal number of men and women made up their minds on how they would vote on the initiatives a month before the election.

Despite these many similarities, women differed from men on several ideological stances, on the way they gathered information and on the way they were influenced by the various themes of the campaign. According to the poll a greater percentage of women would be willing to pay taxes to help finance higher wages for teachers. Figures show that 51% of women would support a tax increase for teachers' wages while just 42% of men would favor such an increase. It is possible -- and would be worth studying -- that in Utah more men than women pay the taxes for their family and as a result would tend to be more conservative in what they agree to raise taxes for. Perhaps women have a stronger maternal/domestic instinct and issues like education for their children are slightly more important to them than they are to men. Whatever the motivation, the idea of cutting back on education to save money does not appeal to women as much
as it does to men. Only 29% of women thought that current funding for education should be cut or stay the same whereas 46% of men felt such cuts would be appropriate. As far as a possible increase in spending for education was concerned, 61% of women would have supported it while only 47% of the male vote advocated such a step.

Women were slightly less trusting of the initiative process than men. About 61% of women felt that direct legislation was a good thing compared to 68% of men who felt it was a good thing. It would seem logical that those who distrust the initiative process would tend to vote against the initiatives. If this is the case it would influence more women than men.

While the majority of both men and women claimed that television and newspapers were their best sources of information on the initiatives, one-third of the women polled said that their most important source of information was word of mouth or some other source besides television, radio, newspaper, or voter pamphlet. Only 18% of men said that word of mouth or another source was their best source of information. The significance of these statistics becomes even more evident in light of the campaign strategy of those opposing the initiatives.

As I mentioned before, the side that defines the issue the best usually wins and the anti-initiatives group was the most successful in convincing the public of their point of view. The KBYU poll shows that the themes behind the campaign for the initiatives were less influential than the themes their opponents used; furthermore, the campaign for the initiatives was particularly ineffective with women.

One of the themes the proponents of the initiatives desperately tried to drive home was that "prosperity follows tax cuts." This idea went over fairly well with men, 47% of whom agreed that a reduction in taxes would fuel the economy.
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However, only 29% of the women that voted were convinced prosperity would come from tax cuts and 18% said they "did not know," whereas just 8% of men were undecided. This is perhaps another indictment against the effectiveness of the initiative campaign; they failed to convince a significant block of undecided voters of their position. On many of the themes there is a higher rate of indecision among women than men. Dr. Magleby suggest that where doubt or decision lurk, there is a greater tendency to vote against the initiatives and maintain the status quo (1984).

Another question on the KBYU poll asked the voter if they felt Utah schools were doing a good job. The advocates of the initiatives felt that if the voters could be convinced that Utah schools were doing a good job then cuts in funding would not seem so critical. Certainly few people would vote for cuts if they felt that Utah schools were doing a bad job and lacked the funds to improve. Almost 11% more men than women felt that Utah schools were doing a good job. Both men and women were about equal on the "don't know" response.

Another point the Tax Limitation Coalition tried to put across was that "tax cuts were good for other states," believing that if they could convince the voters of this the initiatives would pass. Again, more men than women agreed with this idea by a margin of 44% to 33% respectively.

A message the Coalition probably should have used more extensively, but for some reason did not, was that "tax cuts send a message to government." This would have been an effective argument because it would have pulled debate away from whether or not these particular initiatives were good or bad and moved it toward general consensus that taxes -- particularly higher taxes -- are unacceptable to the voting public. Even with the meager attempts of the Coalition to put this idea across to the public,
54% of men agreed with it. Women were not quite so sure the cuts would send such a message; only 37% thought that it would and 21% (versus 10% of the male vote) were undecided.

The single most effective campaign slogan of this campaign -- which happened to be generated by the opposition -- was that the initiatives "go too far"; 63% of the electorate agreed with that statement. This was also the only theme that women believed more than men by a rate of 65% to 60%. It is also interesting that this was one of the few issues where both men and women were well decided; very few of either sex checked the "don't know" response. Compared to the proponents of the initiatives, the opponents did a much better job at persuading the public -- and particularly women -- from an opposing or undecided point of view to their position.

These data from the KBYU poll indicate that in Utah, women seemed to have different attitudes from men about spending and education, often received their information from different sources than men did, and were more convinced by the anti-initiatives themes and less convinced by the pro-initiative themes than men were. Why?

According to consultant Mickey Gallavin, those working to defeat the initiatives "focused their campaign on women." He said that the reason for doing so was because polls showed that "most people defined this as an education issue more than anything else, and that women were generally more concerned with education than men." Because at the start of the campaign more women than men were voting for the initiatives, and research showed this legislation was being interpreted as an education issue (which women cared about more than men), the opponents saw that female vote as large and winnable.

The first step in their opposition strategy, according to Gallavin, was to get every organization
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that would be affected by these cuts -- from Project 2000 to the Chamber of Commerce -- to publicly announce their opposition to the initiatives and join forces with Tax Payers of Utah to defeat them. Three of the largest and most prominent groups they enlisted were the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), the Utah Education Association (UEA), and the League of Women Voters, all three of which are predominantly female. Gallavin said his research showed that if they could get 90% of their own constituents, many of which were female, they could defeat the initiatives. By striving to win the votes of the members of these organizations they were focusing on female voters.

The next big push, and according to Gallavin the most effective, was the two-pronged effort of the PTA. Their first project was to break every city up into precincts and assign each member to a certain precinct, where they would visit every home at least two or three times until they spoke to someone face to face. Starting at the end of August and continuing right up through election day, these PTA members, armed with piles of pamphlets and the powers of persuasion, began to visit each home in their precincts to convince people of the damage they thought would be done to education in Utah if the initiatives passed. Though this is not conclusive, it would seem probable that because the majority of PTA members are women and because women are generally more free and flexible during the day, women would be going to house to house during the day and probably speaking to women that were home during the day. This, however, is only conjecture.

The PTA's next tactic was to devote their regularly allotted portion of time on "Back-To-School Night" to information about the initiatives. Each PTA representative was instructed not to tell parents how to vote on the initiatives but to inform
the parents as accurately as they could how that particular school would be affected by these tax cuts. Supporters of the initiatives were given -- and encouraged to take -- equal time to present their point of view. Sometimes this led to very heated debate, but more often than not, says Mickey Gallavin, the pro-initiative people failed to make an appearance or give an adequate argument at these meetings. Though statistics are not available, it would probably be a safe and important assumption to say that more women than men attend the "Back-To-School Night" sponsored by the PTA each fall.

The hypothesis that these efforts directly affected women more than men is partially supported by the fact, as was mentioned earlier, that according to the KBYU poll women were persuaded by word of mouth or another source more than men. Certainly the efforts of the PTA would fall under either of those categories.

That the campaigning of the PTA had a significant impact on voters is powerfully confirmed by the Jones tracking poll. Jones's poll shows that through most of the summer months support for the initiatives declined, but it was a very, very gradual decline. Using Initiative A as an example, in the beginning of June 1988 56% of the electorate favored it and only 23% opposed it. By the end of August 1988 support had only dipped to about 53% and opposition had only risen one or two points. However, between the end of August and October 18, 1988 (only seven or eight weeks), support sagged to 40% while opposition skyrocketed to 49%. Though perhaps less dramatic, the voting behavior on the other two initiatives demonstrated similar phenomena (see Table A -- Jones poll). In other words, from the start the initiatives gradually lost support but something happened in late August or early September to begin to change dramatically the
attitude of Utah voters about the initiatives. It was the last week in August when the PTA started their door-to-door campaigning and it was in the middle of September when Back-To-School Nights began.

An additional evidence that these initiatives were most effectively defeated by the work of the PTA is that members of the Tax Limitation Coalition who sponsored the legislation claim that the PTA's efforts are what did them in. In a conversation with Mills Crenshaw, he said, "We did not have the money or the resources the other group had but what really killed us were the Back-To-School Nights" (December 16, 1988). Undoubtedly the PTA's efforts had a significant impact on the electorate.

In summary, it is clear the initiatives started with considerable support and, as with most initiatives, support naturally declined. This decline can partially be attributed to the campaign efforts of Tax Payers for Utah who were able to outspend the Tax Limitation Coalition by at least three to one, were able to secure a plethora of elite and media endorsements, and were very effective in defining the issue. Women were particularly affected by the efforts of this group. The reason for this may perhaps be that women have a strong maternal instinct and as a result responded with greater conviction against legislation they thought might affect their children's education negatively. Another more provable reason is that the campaign to defeat the initiatives was staffed by organizations which were primarily female and concentrated on the women voter. One of these organizations, the PTA, was probably the most effective at really influencing the public to change their minds about the initiatives, especially among women.
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2ND INITIATIVE (1988)
REDUCE SALES TAXES, INCOME TAXES.

3RD INITIATIVE (1988)
TAX CREDIT FOR PRIVATE SCHOOLS.